

PENNY MOONZ
CREEPERSLANDIA



**WALLY'S CHRISTMAS
REVENGE**

Wally's Christmas Revenge

PENNY MOONZ

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Illustration by Kitt St. Joans

Creeperslandia is a real place.

*I hope you journey there with me into its wonderful
darkness, where we might perhaps escape, even if for only
a short while.*

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M.
~

M

Allow me to tell you about my dear Wally. He is both a house guest and roommate. He's a worrier and antsy and loves to decorate and put nice blankets on my bed. He often confides in me with his problems, and we keep each other good company. I guess that we are, perhaps, best friends."

****Maybellene****

Chapter 1

Barbara, the A.I. speaker, lit up and started to chime.

"THE ALARM IS GOING OFF."

"IT HAS BEEN 20 MINUTES."

The speaker's light flashed along with the gentle sound of the alarm tone.

"Barbara, turn off the alarm." Wally the vampire hunched over the oven and opened the door. The smell of fresh cookies dazzled his nose and the heat blooming out hit the tips of his cold ears.

"WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SET ANOTHER ALARM FOR 20 MINUTES?"

"No thanks." Wally's voice was shrill and nasally. As he stared into the oven, admiring his baking skills, the thin wisps of hair on the tips of his ears curled under the heat. He grabbed his moose head oven mitt, and pulled out the tray of chocolate chip cookies, placing them on the stovetop to cool. "Barbara, what is the weather today?" His voice cackled.

The speaker lit up.

*"TODAY IT IS 35 DEGREES WITH A 40 PERCENT CHANCE
OF RAIN."*

Barbara said.

*"HAVE A WONDERFUL DAY WALLY."
"AFTER ALL IT IS ALMOST CHRISTMAS."*

"You bet your ass it is." Wally glinted the points of his teeth with a happy smile. "I fucking love Christmas!" He shrilled. "Barbara!"

"YES, WALLY?"

"Play some Christmas music."

*"YOU GOT IT."
"THIS IS JINGLE BELL ROCK, BY BOBBY HELMS."*

"Fuck yeah," Wally said, whipping the mitts off and getting his phone to take a picture. There were stacks of cookie sheets, snickerdoodles, chocolate chip, and Mexican wedding cookies, heaping with white powdery sugar. The kitchen was a catastrophic mess. Flour spilled and swept over the counter top. The plastic wrap, the Christmas kind with Christmas trees had unraveled itself and hung down, clung to the side of the cabinet. There were chocolate chips and an open carton of eggs. The sink was full of eggshells and unwashed bowls. Dirty spoons and knives and kitchen scissors.

Wally pulled the rollie chair into the kitchen to sit down. He was a lazy person, that was obvious. He went to great lengths to do less. If he could stand, he would sit. And so, he rolled himself across the kitchen, grabbed the tin of cookies he had done for the Millers. It was filled with all three kinds. He rolled himself to the breakfast table that had a holly table cloth and the poinsettia in the center. He

turned on the light overhead then turned off the kitchen light, trying to get the best angle for the picture.

Beatrice, the black cat, got up on the chair by the breakfast table and peeked over the top. "Thank you, Bee! That's great!" Wally snapped the picture and then another one. "This'll really make Molly insane! This picture is way better than the garbage she posted today."

Molly Fitzpatrick lived across the street and was Wally's worst enemy. Not because she knew his secret, that he was a demon of the night, a blood sucker, a vampire. She wasn't hunting him down and breaking into his house to find him napping in his coffin and striking him in the heart with wooden stakes or trying to drive him out of town with a lynch mob. She did not know he was a vampire at all. That is not why she was Wally's worst enemy. She was his worst enemy because she out-Christmased him.

She put more lights and decorations on her house. She had a bigger and better tree. She wore louder Christmas sweaters. And she posted the best stuff on Instagram. Last week she had gone to the Nutcracker Market and posted a story with her sitting on Santa's lap. It wasn't just that. She then posted her shopping haul. It was bags and bags of panettone wrapped in red bows, giant candy canes, Christmas nightgowns for her nieces, festive chips and dips, and nuts and sweets. She had a new, giant Texas-style Christmas wreath for the door. And the most impressive thing of all was a life-sized nutcracker.

Just thinking about it made Wally seethe.

He posted his picture on Instagram and then waited for the feedback. He looked at Molly's profile again and she had added something else. She had gone out of town to visit her mom and was hanging ornaments on yet another Christmas tree. It was angel-themed, with tiny angel ornaments, white feathers, and all-white lights, and pearl-colored balls. Very classy. Annoying.

"Give it a rest, bitch." Wally put his phone down.

He had tons to do, a pile of tins waiting to be filled with goodies, and the cards to be filled out and signed and to clean the kitchen of course.

“Meeeeahhhoooww” Beatrice wound around his feet.

“Oh, do you want something?” Wally asked, “Well, what is it?”

“Mmmmmmmeeeeeeehhhh” Bee looked at him sternly.

Wally went to the pantry cupboard and got the box of cat food and put some in her bowl. “There.”

The cat ran to the bowl and started scarfing it happily. Wally bent down to pet her and she moved away from his touch.

He griped. “Ok.....bitch” and returned to the mess, becoming deflated at the sight of it. So unorganized, tizzied his brain. The tins scattered around the counter were all different colors. He had a plain one that was hunter green. He’d tie that one up with a red bow and use the snowy label for the Millers. They were nice and not too nosey. There was the decorated tin, with an image of a fat, red-cheeked Santa on a sleigh and a bunch of reindeer pulling it. He’d give that one to the Randall’s. They had kids and were never home. The plain red tin would get the golden bow he had kept from last year. That would go to Molly Fitzpatrick, the Christmas goon. She was out of town, so she shouldn’t be a problem.

And The last one was white. It was a left-over tin from a candy shop Wally had gone to last month. That one would have no bow and the red card. That one went to Mr. Garret. He was an asshole. He had called the HOA a couple of times about the grass being too high and Wally had to mow the yard right after the sun went down because he couldn’t get a hold of Jesus, the yard man, who had refused to come back for some reason. And then Mr. Garrett, the asshole, complained to HOA that Wally was mowing the lawn too late in the day. Eventually, Wally would get rid of Mr. Garrett one way or another, but this month there was just

too much to do. Wally searched the counter for one more tin to give to Jesus, the yard man to patch things up. He searched in the pantry, finding a polka dot one, silver and white, peeking over the edge of the top shelf.

“Oh, and the damn church,” Wally mumbled, grabbing the tin.

He needed to drop one off at Saint Agnes as well. Maybellene used to be very active there and he liked to keep things inconspicuous. He went over to his list and wrote on the bottom.

Get cookie tin for church.

Wally went to the other side of the kitchen to check out the fruit cake, resting on a cooling rack. The smell was marvelous, ginger and cinnamon and spiced rum and it looked like a Christmas tree, speckled with walnuts and different colors, candied green, and red, and yellow and orange. Wally patted it happily. The hefty cake was room temperature and ready to go. He got the roll of decorated wrap and wound it around the cake over and over, giggling to himself, as little green Christmas trees stretched over it. He ripped the plastic wrap and tried to bundle it under the cake, but it clung to his fingers and he swatted his hand trying to get it loose. Finally, he got untangled himself and wrapped it around the bottom correctly.

He found a sticky pad and wrote on it with a black sharpie.

Season's Greetings Kermit! Hope all is well!

He chuckled softly, and then harder, shaking his shoulders, as he struggled to draw a large, crooked smiley face and was overcome with laughter. He slapped the fruit cake, mashing the note on top of it.

He'd mail it out at Fed Ex, marked that on his list, and grabbed the large cardboard box from the counter. It was heavy in his arms, full of decorations and a giant tangle of Christmas lights. This was the last box he had pulled from the attic, and he looked for any spot undecorated.

The kitchen was pretty much done. The table had the holly table cloth and a poinsettia on top. The oven was decorated with elf Christmas towels, and the oven mitt was replaced with a moose one. The kitchen rug was of a cartoon reindeer. He had put lights along under the cabinets. There was the snowman cookie jar he put out. He searched the box and plucked out the Christmas mugs for hot chocolate and tramped into the living room.

It was vintage you could say. All the furniture was old, bought right after the house was built in the 60s. It was almost a time machine if you didn't look at the modern touches of decoration. And at Christmas time the house was fully decorated. The staircase glittered with red and green tinsel strung all along the banister. He had his collection of snow globes above the fireplace and the fresh pine garland of course which really made it smell like Christmas. He had scented candles throughout the house, peppermint and cinnamon, and pine.

Three stockings, one for Wally, One for Maybellene and one for Bee, the cat, hung down over the mantel. He had knitted them himself a few years ago. His was the biggest of course.

The coffee table was covered with a small nativity scene, surrounded by stacks and stacks of Christmas candies. There was an open pack of red and black Oreos with only a few cookies left and a glass jar in the shape of a Christmas tree half full of red and green M&Ms. The living room rug was even Christmas themed, striped red and white, hauled down from the attic last month.

Wally went into the bathroom for a pee. It was small and had Hawaiian wallpaper. The tiny room was not Christmasy at all but had Christmas lights draped along the ceiling. The little bathroom was a beach theme with shell door handles for the sink cabinets and a hula girl soap dispenser. Wally loved to decorate and doing a small area like the bathroom was an easy spot to go wild and extravagant. He

chose Hawaii because he'd probably never travel there. He didn't really enjoy flying. So, this tiny room was a vacation for him. But it did need something Christmas-themed in here aside from the lights. He'd get something at Harlow's today just for the bathroom. Maybe a Christmas night light. Hawaiian Christmas music played as he sat on the toilet and peed. He had put a speaker under the sink last week and it was on non-stop Hawaii Christmas radio.

Wally flushed the toilet and stared into the mirror. He could only see the Christmas sweater he wore and the green velvet pants with powdered sugar he had spilled on himself while making the Mexican wedding cookies. If he was looking in a mirror, he could only see himself with blacklights, where his skin would glow bright, bright white and he could see his periwinkle veins pulsing inside his body. The only room in the house with blacklights was Maybellene's bedroom.

He headed up there to get a jacket on so he could go deliver the cookies to the neighbors. He went up the stairs, stretching his fingers along the tinsel bristles, shiny red and green strips of metallic plastic brushing along the palm of his hand. "Maybellene!" he shouted up. "I need a jacket!" He got to her room and flung the door open, bouncing it clumsily against the wall.

"Sorry." He apologized.

Inside was pitch dark and he flicked on the light switch and went into her closet. The room was old-looking with flowered wallpaper, marble lamps, antique furniture, and an ancient four-poster bed. The air was oppressively stale and a little musty. The odor of moth balls twisted the hairs on the insides of his nose.

"What should I wear?" Wally called from inside the closet.

M

Someone is in my room. someone is talking to me. Drifting back into my dreams. The closet door is opening. I can hear it. Someone is putting on my clothes. A long-fingered, wiry, bone-white man with a nagging high-pitched voice. Wally. My friend. I twitch the wrinkles on my cold face. My covers are warm in my bed.

He grabbed something off the hanger admiring the dark purple fabric. He and Maybellene were the same size and so instead of buying new clothes he just wore hers. They had the same twisty frame. Same cheek bones. She laid still on her bed, completely quiet and still and empty. Her cool skin stretched across her face. Her mouth and thin lips made no expression. Maybellene was a corpse, dead in her blankets. White jutting bones and sparse bristly red chestnut hair. Her head stuck on its pillow. She laid firmly in place. Forever. Wally had moved into this house years ago, while she was still living. When she died in her bed, he kept her there. That's where she likes to be.

"Maybellene, what do you think?" He held the jacket out in front of him.

Maybellene said nothing and Wally came closer.

"Look! Don't I look great in eggplant?" He put the coat on, and it fit perfectly to his frame. The collar was large. It was vintage, from the 70s. He buttoned it up to his paper white neck.

"I'm gonna put more lights on the roof and then deliver the Christmas cookies. I made snickerdoodles this year. Gingerbread men are just too much of a hassle. So, it's chocolate chip and snickerdoodles. And Mexican wedding cookies." He grabbed a scarf from her vanity mirror and wrapped it around his head and plucked the sunglasses from his pocket. "Don't worry I'll be back soon." He flicked off the light and left the room, slamming the door shut.

"Sorry." He mumbled, heading down the stairs.

Chapter Two



Wally pulled the curtain from the back door window and peeked outside. It was dark in the backyard and long, inky shadows scrawled across the grass from the old pecan tree. The only light was from the moon and the gleaming street lamps that stooped over Mossy Cup Lane. It was almost 9 PM and around this time of year, dusk was before 7 but checking the light before running outside was a habit he couldn't afford to break. He skulked out with the box of wadded, tangley Christmas lights. The chilly breeze hit his nose and he flared his nostrils, catching the scent of fire. People had lit their chimneys in Houston. Christmas time was in full swing.

He plodded out and through the garage and got the ladder and leaned it up against the house. The house was old and falling apart. The paint was chipped, and the gutters were rusted. The edges of the roof were crumbling. Wally looked up at the ledge nervously as he balanced the cardboard box along his forearms and began to step upwards. He climbed up awkwardly trying to take the box with him and with each step up higher and higher he became more off balance. Finally, he reached the top and clutched the edge of the roof, and threw the box onto it.

There were patches of ice up there and the breeze was more significant. Wally shivered, gripping the ladder, and

began to untangle the coil of Christmas lights. From up there he could admire the neighborhood. There was a perfect view of the entire block. Almost every house was decked out with lights and decorations. Mr. Garret's house, across the street, had white Christmas lights, a single string across the roof, and a large wreath decorated with red bells on the door. The Miller's had put up the same ones from last year, along with a new strobe light that danced Christmas colors along the front of the house. The Randal's only had the one tree in the front yard decorated, but it was very extravagant with lit-up white icicles hanging down from all the branches and multicolored lights wrapped all around it and down the trunk.

Wally looked over at Molly Fitzpatrick's. He sneered. The curtains of her front window were wide open, so you could see into her living room, exposing an extra-large Christmas tree with nicely wrapped gifts underneath. A ping of jealousy hit Wally and radiated to the tips of his ears. Her living room looked better than his. More Christmasy. There was a row of nutcrackers along the fireplace and two giant Christmas stockings, bulging at the seams with goodies. She even had fake snow on her coffee table and wooden reindeers in the corners of the room. And there, at the edge of the hallway, in clear view, was that damn nutcracker, the one she posted on Instagram. It was big alright, maybe 5 foot tall.

"Show off." Wally scoffed and began to hang up the Christmas lights.

Wally did enjoy how festive his part of the neighborhood was. One house, further down, even had a giant blow-up snowman. Wally's yard was maybe the most extravagant, with candy canes dangling from The Witching tree, a scraggly thing with weird twindles of spindly branches that didn't match the thick trunk. It was by far the ugliest tree in the neighborhood. Kids used to call it The Witching Tree. No one can remember why but they still call it that.

He had gingerbread men for the sidewalk, some that he had bought last year at Harlow's Christmas sale. Wally climbed down, moved the ladder, and went up again, stringing the lights along the top. When he went all the way across, he stepped onto the roof, careful not to slip on the icy shingles. He walked up the tip-top, trailing the string of lights behind him.

M

I hear clumsy, bumping footsteps above me. Someone is on the roof? The smell of cinnamon and spices. Cookies baking. The sweet scent cuts through the stale darkness of my bedroom. I flutter my nose in delight. There's that thudding sound again. Someone is on the roof of my house.

Chapter Three



After the lights on the roof were done, Wally went back inside and got the tins of cookies. He thought about putting on his gloves, but it wasn't quite cold enough. He put the sunglasses on and tightened the scarf on his head and headed out. The stack of cookie tins slid around in his arms and his cheeks burned, struck by the frosty wind. His boots clicked against the concrete as he skulked across the road to Mr. Garret's house, the jerk. Wally stepped foot on the curb and grabbed the white tin from the top of the stack and hurled it at the front door. It crashed into the wreath, knocking it off. The tin hit the porch and rolled down the steps, clattering. The lid came off, spilling all the cookies out. The simple red card held onto the lid.

"Asshole," Wally mumbled.

He went down the sidewalk to the Randal's, towards the giant lit-up tree in the yard. Stepping onto the grass, he reached up and grabbed a lit-up icicle, the white light fluttered in his hand.

"Cool." He screeched.

The tree was multicolored Christmas lights, his favorite kind, and he stood under it for a moment, his arms fumbling with the stack of tins, admiring all the icicles hanging down at him all lit up. He looked at the house. There seemed to be no one home so he went to the front

door, got their tin from the stack with Santa in his sleigh and the reindeer on it. He held it for a moment, kind of sad to let it go but decided he could buy another one, just as nice. He put the tin carefully on the porch and straightened the card on top, pressing it down to make sure it hadn't come loose. He left and walked under the tree again, brushing his hand along the plastic icicle lights.

A gust of frigid wind blew past him, and he hunched down with a tight shiver. "Fuck it's cold." He said nasally, regretting now he didn't put on his gloves.

Next was Molly Fitzpatrick's house and he held the red tin in his hand, fiddling with the golden bow. He walked up to her driveway, looking into the window, glaring at that giant nutcracker in the hall. "Since she's out of town I could just take it." He mumbled. A gust of wind shot through him, pricking needles onto his cheeks and ears. "Fuck it's cold" Wally squealed as he leaned down to the door mat and dropped the tin. The door flung open.

Molly Fitzpatrick stood over him smiling. "Hello, Maybellene! So nice to see you!"

Wally shot back and stood up straight making sure his sunglasses were still on. He touched the scarf over his head, relieved it was still in place. He covered his mouth and changed his voice. "Hi, Molly. What a wonderful surprise."

Molly was wearing a festive green vest with a Christmas tree and bells on it. Wally was instantly jealous, wondering where she got it. She noticed him staring and smiled. "Wouldn't you like to come inside? It's so cold out here. We could have some hot chocolate."

Wally grinned, his sharp teeth poking out as he shoved his hand over them. "Oh. No! thanks but no hot chocolate for me. I've got to keep delivering these Christmas goodies." He held up the last tin. "I love the winter." He shivered. "It's wonderful!"

"Oh, ok maybe next week we'll catch up."

“I’ll be busy.” Wally shrieked and started backing away. “Goodbye!” He waved and turned, quickly walking down the sidewalk back home.

“Bye! Thank you for this!” Molly held up the tin, rattling the cookies inside.

Chapter Four



Molly Fitzpatrick watched as Maybellene Simons sprinted away. “How does she move so fast?” Molly asked herself. “I hope I’m doing that well at a hundred.”

Molly hadn’t seen Maybellene up close in a long time. It had been years in fact since the last time they spoke. And she remembered it clearly. They were sitting in Maybellene’s home, in the living room. The old woman didn’t say much. She was feeble and soft-spoken. They had sat in the dark. The tv was on some game show and they visited and sipped hot peppermint tea. Maybellene Simmons was an old woman in her late 90s bundled up in her blanket and could barely hold a conversation. As she spoke her voice was soft and windy. Molly had to lean in to hear her over the television.

And back then, when you’d see her outside, Maybellene would be in her front yard, going to the mail box to check the mail or to The Witching Tree to put food in the bird feeder. She was very frail, her narrow back stooped and she took slow and deliberate steps. She seemed careful like she was afraid to fall. And if she carried a small bag of bird food, she’d lean over like it was 50 pounds. Molly would come to visit from time to time but since that last visit years ago, Molly hadn’t been inside the house. Usually,

when she caught Maybellene Simmons, she was driving that old Cadillac.

But Maybellene was doing much better now it seemed. She was spry though she didn't look well. Tonight, under the porch light she was faded and sickly and looked malnourished under the scarf and sunglasses. The coat hid her frame, but her fingers were quite boney. The light had shown down at an unflattering angle and Maybellene's face was sunken in and her nose had grown especially long and pointy.

"Maybe she's juicing." Molly sucked her teeth with confused suspicion. She stared, watching Maybellene dash up her sidewalk, and enter her home. As the door opened, Molly could see the inside of the house. It was glowing, bursting with lights and Christmas nick-nacks and decorations, stuffed stockings over the fireplace, glittery garlands strung along the banister, and a towering Christmas tree, sparkling with red lights and bows and candy canes. Molly's cheeks flushed with envy. "And why was she wearing sunglasses?"

Chapter Five



As Wally came rushing back towards the house, he noticed the dangle of lights over the front window had gone out. "Shit." He said and burrowed his neck-deep into the heat of the coat and went inside. The house was warm and inviting. The smell of cinnamon from the snickerdoodles had permeated the living room. He shouted up the stairs, his cackled voice echoed through the halls. "Maybellene! I saw Molly Fitzpatrick! She says hello!" He whipped off the scarf and sunglasses and stomped into the kitchen, realizing he was still holding the cookie tin for the Miller's. "Fuck it," he said throwing them on the counter.

The baking mess was still there, bowls dirtied and lined with dried cookie dough and the roll of Christmas tree saran wrap half unraveled and stuck to the cabinets. Cinnamon and flour powdered the counter. The butter needed to go back in the fridge. He sneered and reluctantly forced himself to clean, wiping everything down and putting the sugar and vanilla and chocolate chips away in the pantry. He looked at his list of things to do.

He added ***Christmas lights for the front window.***

Then he added ***a giant nutcracker for the living room.***

A smirk crept across Wally's face. He could make his house look way better than Molly Fitzpatrick's. Way, way

better.

He went to the breakfast table and snatched his coupon book. The coupon book was heavy, and over stuffed, with tiny clipped-out pieces of paper jutting out from each page. Wally secured it under his arm and grabbed the fruit cake to mail out at Fed Ex and the car keys. "Maybellene! I'm going to Harlow's do you need anything?" His ears perked to listen. "Ok. I'll be back in a tick!" He headed to the back door and stood at the coat rack, a catch-all for umbrellas, coats and a variety of hats hung around the top. There was an Astros one. A Santa Claus cap, red velvet with the white fluffy ball at the end. A tattered raccoon cap with a tail that shed a lot. He got that on a road trip. A flurry hat with ear flaps, a few beanies, one that was very long like a long sleeping cap.

He picked up the Santa hat and thought about it. "You're doing tha most Wally. Cool it." He mumbled. "Wear it on Christmas." He put it back. "Here get this one." he grabbed the long beanie.

It was festive, striped red and green, and very long, hung down to his shoulders with a red fuzzy pom pom. It looked like something an elf would wear. He shoved it on his head, covering his long pointy ears, folding them down. The thin wisps of hair along his head sprung out underneath.

"Barbara!" He yelled.

The A.I. speaker lit up blue in response.

"Play Maybellene by Chuck Berry!"

"OK."
"PLAYING MAYBELLENE BY CHUCK BERRY."

Wally went out the back door and slammed it behind him. Upstairs, Maybellene was dreaming in her warm, comfortable bed. There was music, a song she liked, playing just beyond the halls.

Chapter Six



The garage was dilapidated, leaned to one side, and bent at the seams. Cobwebs swayed along the top corners as Wally brushed through the grubby-smelling room. It was oil stains, and trash bags, and old boxes, and yard equipment. Inside it was freezing and the Cadillac sat there, unused for a few days. A spider had started a web over the hood of it. Maybellene had bought the car, new, in the 70s and the paint job was still good today. Butter yellow and shiny. Wally had added black-out tinted windows so he could travel in the daylight if he needed to, and he had attached some woolly reindeer antlers, stuck out the windows and there was a red fluffy bulb on the front grill for Rudolph's nose. Wally got in and turned on the heater. The leather seat was ice-cold and chilled his skin through his clothes. The garage door lifted and squealed, rusting wheels on metal hinges and the Cadillac pulled out.

There were new lights in some of the yards, and Wally twisted his neck to see, comparing them to his. He slowly drove past, judging, satisfied that the lights in front of his house were still one of the better ones. He got some Christmas music on the radio and danced along as he got onto the freeway.

The fuzzy deer antlers bounced as he went. Houston sprawled out in front of him, he could see downtown, lit-up,

in the distance. He weaved the Cadillac down the freeway, no turn signal, in between the slower cars and exited, towards Harlow's. There was a detour, but he knew a secret way and it only took him a few turns down residential streets and he was there. The yellow Cadillac careened into the sprawling parking lot of the massive store. It was the size of a Sam's or a Walmart, maybe bigger. He wondered why more people didn't shop here. Probably because it was so hard to find.

The parking lot was brightly lit with tall, looming, orange street lamps. Wally parked close to the front since no one was there and sat for a moment. The Cadillac's pitch-black windows didn't allow any light and so rolled them down. An orange glow poured inside, and he looked through the bulging coupon book. The strips of cut-out coupons were a mish-mash from newspapers, flyers, and mail-outs, arranged by season and then items. He flipped to the Christmas section, finding the Harlow's coupons. Christmas trees were first, then ornaments, then lights, then wreaths then candies and cookies. He ran his scrawny finger along the old, wrinkled clips of thin paper when something excited him. He squeaked with delight and yanked it out of the book.

7 Foot Nutcracker 75% off!

"Fuck yeah." He said and put the coupon in the pocket of the coat. He pulled the beanie down tighter over his ears and swept the pom-pom over his shoulder. Got out of the car, taking the book of coupons with him.

Chapter Seven



Wally headed straight for the Christmas decorations in the center of the store. As he turned the corner, he could see the nutcracker hats over the tops of the section. Majorette hats, different colors, red, and navy blue, and a big tall, black furry one. His mouth foamed with excitement, and he sped up, pushing the cart at a speed that would cause injury to any unlucky shopper that crossed his path.

Eyes glittering and grin intensified, exposed glints of pointy fangs as he drew closer and closer to a very tall nutcracker at the end of the aisle. When he got there, he became spellbound. He was a child under its height. He was in complete awe.

It was the ultimate Christmas find.

"I have to have it." He squalled.

It had a classic red coat with big brass buttons and a tall, furry black hat. A long, extravagantly girth black feather stuck out the top. Wide-eyed, Wally reached up innocently and brushed his hand along it, feeling it gently, and smiled. He stood aback, arms on his hips, admired it for a moment.

The height was dominant and delightful at a whopping 7 ft and even though it was made of plastic, it looked to be wood. Not too glossy. I looked like real wood, a flat and slightly polished texture with fake lines of woodgrain. He

was entranced at the detail. Wally held his hands close to his mouth and began to fidget with excitement, fluttering and clicking his fingernails.

He bent down, clutching his chest and beaming, looking at the marvel, bottom to top and leaning backwards to take it all in. "Yes!" He shook his claw in triumphant delight. "Way better than Molly Fitzpatrick's. Much, much bigger."

He wondered about the weight, considering the size, and hunkered down around its knees. The fuzzy ball of Wally's long cap dangled, brushing along his face. He leaned back and tossed it around his shoulder. He bent down again and grabbed the backs of the nutcracker's legs, lifted and to his surprise it wasn't very heavy. Clumsy, and teetering with awkward balance, he managed to get it in the cart. Now it was even taller, quite a spectacle. There was a smudge on the nutcracker's legs and Wally licked his long, pale finger and tried to clean it off.

One of the wheels of the cart wobbled under the weight as he rolled through the section. He saw the large, plastic gingerbread men he had bought before, the ones he had placed along the sidewalk. There was a display, stacked in a twirl like a Christmas tree, boxes of multicolored candy canes. He began to reach up to get the one on top when a Harlow's associate brushed behind him.

"Excuse me." Wally quacked.

"Sorry." The man was short and stocky. Choppy blonde bangs cut across his forehead and he had a gold cross earring dangling long from one ear.

Wally saw that his name tag said Kermit and he chortled a laugh. A tiny smirk creased along the curve of his lips. "Can you get that one on top for me please?" Wally pointed his long spindly arm and his long twiggy finger, almost touching the box of bright rainbow candy canes.

"Sure." The man said. He fumbled, trying to reach up there but he couldn't. He ran off to get a small ladder and returned. Unsteady he climbed up, barely touching the box

with his small hand. He got it and passed it to Wally reaching right next to him.

"Thanks a bunch." Wally patted him on the back.

"No problem," The short blonde man said, the earring swayed along the side of his face as he hopped off the ladder.

Wally never liked doing much himself. If there was someone else around, he'd always get them to do it. There was a new, seasonal display of three kinds of fudge. "Oh, fudge." His eyes glittered as he snatched a box and put it into the cart next to the nutcracker's oversized boots. He looked down at the box of candy canes, enticed by the bright rainbow colors.

It was at that moment he felt a little dizzy. "Oh, man. I need a pick me up." He muttered, and leaned, turning the cart towards the meat section. He hadn't eaten in a few hours and so he was feeling weak and blurry. As he passed the checkout counters where long lines trailed all the way into the clothing section, he had to excuse himself, pushing the cart through the narrow gaps of customers.

The wobbling wheel of the cart jostled rabidly as he hurried to the cooler part of the store. There, in that section, it was a different kind of shopping. It was grocery lists, things you needed and less excitement and wonder, more sterile and absolute. Food and toilet paper and foil and water and cleaning supplies. Refrigerators hummed and the aisles were glass doors, frosted and fogged in spots, showing off pot pies and meatloaf and ice creams and frozen peas.

Wally could smell the meat section from here and his pupils dilated. He flexed his teeth when he saw the pink and white marbled chuck roasts on the shelf only seconds in front of him. He parked the cart. The nutcracker stood tall inside it, towering over him as he reached down, searching the display for the pack of meat with the most blood inside it. He found a steak that looked drippy. His

fangs became anxious, extending to sharp, foaming pricks. Without looking around he put the steak up to his nose and smelled past the plastic wrapping. He put his mouth on the corner and did a small nibble, piercing the plastic with his tooth. A small hole came open and he sucked as blood dribbled out. He got all of it and threw the meat, returning it to the pile, and wiped his mouth with the back of his coiled hand. Relieved, his eyes fluttered. He felt a lot better.

A Harlow's associate was watching him from across the chicken wings cooler. It was a frumpy woman in a wheelchair, with a curly black ponytail. She gripped a price gun in one hand. Her arm was shaking and her knuckles were white like her face that was drained of color.

Wally stared. "Is there a problem?" He asked nonchalantly.

She gawked. Mouth hanging open. Her red vest had an embroidered patch on it that said. *Harlow's has unbeatable prices!*

Wally tilted his head sarcastically and matched her face, dropping his mouth open and gawking back at her. The points of his teeth peeked out from under his top lip. He widened his eyes like what are you looking at? His voice cracked. "Can you go look in the back and bring out the rest of your beef? I want to look at it."

The woman closed her mouth and spun herself around so fast she almost turned over, wheeling herself away from the chicken wings cooler, thrusting her arms with each motion as she flew down the chip aisle and out of sight.

Wally huffed and searched the rest of the display, throwing packs of meat side to side inside the cooler. He found a pot roast that looked exciting. Blood had pooled under the Styrofoam tray and began to leak red and drippy through the bottom of the plastic underneath. Wally held it to his mouth, cut the plastic with both teeth, and sucked it dry. His hands were sticky from it and he twittled his

fingers. There was a shaky woman's voice over the loud speaker. "CODE 78 IN THE MEAT DEPARTMENT. I SAID CODE 78." The woman's voice squeaked. "IN THE MEAT DEPARTMENT."

Wally threw the meat back into the pile and headed to check out, licking sticky drips of blood from the corners of his fingernails.

Chapter Eight



When Wally reached the front of Harlow's, there was a single checkout open, about 5 people ahead of him. At the front of the line was a man pulling one item of the cart out at a time, very slowly placing them on the counter. It looked like a month's worth of groceries, frozen pizzas, wings, chips, and Hot Pockets spilled over the top of the cart.

"Really?" Wally said. Looking for another line to get in, but there were no other lines open. He leaned over his cart in acceptance and then he saw the sign, taped above the rack of candy bars.

Get even MORE discounts with our NEW discount card!

Wally lit up a little and went over to it. There was a neat stack of post cards, forms to fill out for the discount card. Wally got one and returned to his spot in line.

He filled it out mumbling to himself. "Name?" He licked his pointy tooth. "Waaallllyfred"

He filled it out very carefully, wanting to make sure it was legible. "Address?"

The woman in line in front of him turned around, her face scrunched in amusement. She smiled at him. Wally recoiled in embarrassment, and instead of sounding it out, he mouthed the words silently.

"Email?" He whispered so softly only he could hear.

The woman turned back around and tried not to giggle.

When he finished with the form, he looked again at his giant nutcracker. Wonderfully large, with broad shoulders and a big toothy grin. Wally hummed happily, brushed his hand along the slick legs, and focused, searching for dents or scrapes but couldn't find any.

It was finally his turn at the checkout, and he wheeled the cart to the end of the counter, handed the cashier the form for the discount card, and started unloading his stuff onto the conveyer belt. The cashier took a moment to look at the form, noticing how perfect Wally's handwriting was. So elegant, she thought, pushed her glasses up, higher on her nose. She smiled at him, but he didn't notice as he put the box of rainbow candy canes on the counter.

The cashier had red, clear framed glasses, that took up half her face. They kind of matched her hair. It was a bright red mullet, and curly. She was overweight and wore jeans and a t-shirt and the Harlow's vest with the slogan on it. Her name tag said ROBERTA surrounded by little stars and smiley face stickers. Wally paid her no attention until she leaned over the cart and scanned the nutcracker.

Wally smiled, but not too big, he kept his top lip down, covering his pointy fangs. When he did this, he seemed to have a ridiculous overbite and a slack jaw. "I have a coupon for that." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the tattered coupon and placed it gently on the counter.

Roberta grabbed it and scanned it with her machine. *BEEP BEEP HONK*. She smiled and scanned it again. *BEEP BEEP HONK*.

Wally put the box of fudge on the counter with a *THUNK*.

Roberta took a closer look at the coupon and shook her head. "I'm sorry sir this coupon is expired."

"No, that's impossible." He waved his hand dismissively. "Scan it again. Or put in the numbers manually."

"Sorry sir, this coupon expired" Roberta held the coupon to her face and her eyes went wide. "Fifteen years ago."

Wally snatched it from her. "Give me that!" He squalled.

She noticed his long, white fingernails and then took a closer look at his face. Wally anxiously pushed his lip down hard, making sure he was hiding the points of his teeth. He could feel his fangs growing downward with the anger bubbling up inside him.

He was getting flustered, and his ears began pointing higher. His beanie was pushing upward. He yanked it down the sides of his head.

Roberta read the amount. "That comes to thirteen dollars and fifty-seven cents." She said in a slight southern accent.

Wally clasped the bony hollow of his chest "That's outrageous!" He waved his hand, spreading his fingers wide. "That's too much! I can't believe the nerve of this place!" Wally's gestures were naturally extravagant and gregarious and as he became more outraged his movements extended, his arms and fingers seemed to lengthen with each dramatic gesture. "It's Christmas time after all!" The tail of his beanie swung behind him with every theatrical movement. "I'd never get charged that much down the street!"

Roberta was very still, watching him closely, choosing her words carefully so Wally, the customer, wouldn't further unfurl. "I'm sorry sir but here at Harlow's. We price match everything with every store and sell it for at least fifty percent cheaper." Roberta paused and looked at Wally, who stared angrily back at her, unsatisfied. She noticed his beanie seemed to be getting taller but tried to ignore it. "Harlow's has unbeatable prices." She straightened the glasses that were edging down her nose.

Wally gawked. "I demand that you take this." He waved the flimsy coupon at her like a damsel's handkerchief.

A security guard came over, seemingly from nowhere. He was tall and big with thick shoulders and a potbelly that edged over his belt. He looked serious with a determined

stance and leaned over the counter sternly. "Is there a problem here?"

Wally screeched, throwing his hand up, blocking the sight of him with wide, stretched fingers, as if not seeing him would make the security guard simply disappear. "Go away we don't need you here."

The line forming behind him was getting longer and longer as people watched Wally flailing and batting his hand.

The security guard picked up the candy canes and box of fudge, about to place them back into the cart. "Sir you need to leave now if you aren't going to buy this." He said.

Wally jumped over to him and reached. "Give me that. Put it down." The security guard moved in closer. "Don't touch me! Puggy fudge man!" Wally poked his stomach.

"That's it. You have to go." The security guard grabbed Wally's cart, yanking it away. Wally grabbed the side and slammed his feet down, sliding along the vinyl floor as the security pulled the cart to the wall. Wally began shrieking as the nutcracker swayed, almost teetering over.

"Careful with it!" Wally said. "Wait!" He did a quick stride back to the cashier who was already starting to ring up someone else. "I can pay full price." Wally pulled his wallet out and opened it to see a only a five and two ones. He realized he didn't have enough and snapped it shut. "Can I put it on layaway?" He asked softly.

Roberta winced. "Ohhh, I'm sorry we don't have layaway here sir."

Wally started seething and shaking, his fangs were all the way down and he closed his mouth as tight as he could, covering his teeth with his lip. "Fine!" He yelled and pointed at Roberta. "But you'll be sorry!"

Wally whipped around and looked longingly at the nutcracker who smiled down at him from the cart. He wanted to grab it and go but he knew it was too big and it would be too hard to run with. The security guard seemed

to know what he was thinking and eyed him cautiously, leaning in his direction, ready to chase if necessary. Wally turned towards the exit and stomped out of Harlow's with the security guard following him.

Chapter Nine



In the Cadillac, Wally was fuming. He didn't want to go home. He couldn't think of it. He couldn't leave. Not without the nutcracker. But he didn't have the money to pay for it. Thinking about it over and over just made him angrier. His skin was burning hot, he twitched and hissed at nothing, staring at the dashboard, unable to drive off.

He glared into the parking lot as other people rolled their carts along the asphalt, hauling bags of Christmas wreaths and big screen TVs and doll houses and bicycles. They all seemed happy, headed home to their families with secret gifts, ready to be hidden and then wrapped. This made Wally foam with rage. He gripped the steering wheel and tightened his knuckles unsure of what to do. He hunched into a tight wad, glaring at them as he rocked back and forth, grinding his clenched teeth.

An SUV drove past him, booming Christmas rap with heavy base. For some reason, he relaxed and loosened a little and decided to get on his phone and find something. It was then he noticed the car smelled like cinnamon. He looked down at the fruit cake wrapped in Christmas tree plastic wrap. He had forgotten he needed to drop it off for shipping. He'd do that tomorrow, he decided. It smelled nice though.

One of his favorite podcasts had a new episode. It was a paranormal call-in show called Creepers and he sat there and listened. After a while, he had cooled off and deflated enough to head back home, put the keys in the ignition, and started the car. Just then, someone walked out into the parking lot.

It was Roberta, the checkout lady.

Chapter Ten



Roberta pulled her vest tight around her as she went out into the parking lot. She looked up at the moon. Through a blanket of passing clouds, a halo of ice circled around the silver disk. That meant it was freezing or going to freeze. She had heard it might snow tonight but doubted it. It hardly snowed in Houston. She got out her cigarettes and put one in her mouth as she walked to her gold, two-tone Chevy truck. She unlocked it and swung open the old metal door with a loud creak.

A customer passed by, cart rattling loudly as he pushed towards the back of the lot. Roberta got in the truck and settled, starting the engine wondering if she'd get some fast food for dinner. She checked her phone and then realized she'd forgotten something. "Damn it." She mumbled and touched the keys, deciding to leave it running, and got out. Moving slowly across the parking lot, she sucked the cigarette down, burning to the bud, and crushed it out before going back inside the sliding doors.

Wally hunched behind the steering wheel, gripping it excitedly. As he watched, the curls of his lips coiled higher and higher, mischievously upward as she went back inside.

"Perfect." He said delightfully, twisting his head to look around. No one else was here. The lot was empty. He snatched the fruit cake from the seat and got out, quickly

sneaking across the lot to her truck in long, stretched steps, looking all around as he went. As he got to the truck, he realized it was old and rusted. It smelled like cigarettes and was full of trash, drive-thru paper bags and empty Styrofoam cups littered the passenger floorboard. He could hear something inside. The radio was on.

Country Christmas music played softly from the stereo. Wally held the hefty fruit cake tight in his hands and sprung his arms up and over, high above his head, and hurled it as hard as he could into the windshield. The cracking sound shot through the empty parking lot as the fruitcake smashed into the glass and it dented inward. It cobwebbed and splayed.

Wally mumbled to himself. "Ya dumb bitch." He grinned, admiring the shattered veins stretched across the windshield. And then snorting with delight, he scurried back to the Cadillac.

He closed the door, catching his coat. He opened it and closed it again, the smell of cinnamon still permeating the car. He sat grinning and thought to leave but it was too exciting. He waited, warming his hands and thin fingers with the heater, eyes dancing with delighted anticipation. A minute or two later Roberta appeared again, coming outside from the sliding doors. She was wearing a jacket she didn't have before, and she pulled out another cigarette and began to smoke as she got closer to her truck. She didn't understand what she was looking at at first. She touched her glasses trying to see better. Something was on the hood and when she got close enough the glass shimmered and danced like lighting along the cracks and zig zags on the broken windshield.

"What the fuck?" She said, the cigarette dangling from her mouth. Carefully she got closer and touched the fruit cake, not knowing what it was. She held it in her hand. It was heavy and dense, and she saw the specs of color,

cherries, and orange peel. There was a sticky note on the other side, barely hanging on. She plucked it off.

“Kermit?” She mumbled.

Chapter Eleven



Roberta went back inside Harlow's searching for the security guard but couldn't find him. Then she went looking for Kermit. He was busy, bent over, butt crack showing under his vest that was a little too small for him, focused on stacking a display of Christmas ornaments. Roberta stared. Confused and angry, she held the fruit cake, crumbs falling out of the Christmas tree saran wrap. Her fingers were sticky now and the cinnamon smell was annoying. She tried to stay calm and looked at the post-it note in her hand. She chose her words carefully and waited a moment. Kermit looked up at her from the display but didn't say anything.

Then she spoke. "Kermit, did you throw this through my windshield?"

Kermit looked up at her annoyed. "What?"

"Did you throw this fruit cake?"

Kermit stood up and shook the bangs away from his eyes. He was shorter than her but puffed up his chest and growled. "What did you call me?"

"I said did you throw this fruit cake?"

Kermit pretended to jump at her, his cross earring dangled along his neck. "Call me that again bitch and see what happens."

Roberta stepped back, dropping some of the cake on the floor. "Did you do this?" she held the cake in her hand and

showed him the post-it note. He didn't understand.

"Fuck you, Berta." He said and went back to stacking the ornaments.

Roberta widened her eyes and walked away. "Okaaaaaay." She mumbled to herself, deciding the conversation had gone nowhere and she still didn't know what had happened. She wasn't sure if Kermit had thrown the cake through her windshield or not. She wasn't convinced he had. It more seemed like he hadn't.

She was exhausted. The cake mushed and crumbed in her hand as she made her way back to the front of the store where security was supposed to be, but they still weren't there. She wanted to get them to go back outside with her but didn't know where to look for them and decided to just head back to her truck.

She was furious and kept looking down at the fruit cake. The freezing wind shocked her as she went out the sliding doors and to the parking lot. The eerie glow of the orange street light beamed down as she watched her breath on the way to the truck where the engine was running, and it was heated up by now.

It was too quiet. The only sound was the freeway down the street. Anger turned to concern as she shot her head around, hyper-focused on everything in the parking lot, realizing she was out in the open and whoever did this could attack her at any moment, and she was probably completely alone and defenseless.

Only a few cars were out there and most of them she recognized as employees. There was a yellow Cadillac with those reindeer antlers sticking out of the windows and a red ball on the front grill. Gas emissions steamed out of the tail pipe, a plume of smoke clouding around the back of the car. Roberta squinted, trying to see inside but the windows were too dark.

"Are they watching me?"

She went cautiously at first towards it but as she got closer, she wasn't afraid anymore. Her cheeks were flushed and blazing hot. An icy gust of wind blew past her, swaying her red hair. She gripped the fruit cake, dug into it with her fingers, and came up to the driver's side window. She could see nothing inside, and her reflection was black. She knocked on the window loudly, rattling the glass. "Excuse me." She said, "Did you do this?" She held out the wad of fruit cake. Some of it dropped to the ground.

Wally sneered from inside the warm car. Not sure what to do. His teeth flexed down into his bottom lip. Roberta knocked against his window again, almost breaking it. Wally huffed and he covered his mouth and rolled the window down.

Chapter Twelve



Roberta looked through the open crack of the window. It was only an inch or two. Heat billowed out and warmed her. There was a very pale man inside, with his hand covering the bottom half of his face. He glared. "Can I help you?" His voice was very nasally.

She recognized him. It was the man from a while before, the crazy guy with the old coupon.

He definitely did this, she thought.

Roberta held the fruitcake towards him. "Did you throw this at my windshield?"

The man's eyes danced with excitement. "Me?" He squealed, still covering his mouth. "No." He said cheerfully. "I think that you might have some haters. Maybe if you gave better customer service, you'd"

It was then that Roberta lost it. She lunged at him, unable to get into the window. She wanted to snatch at him, yank that damn beanie off his head. She gripped the window and he tried to roll it up. She was pushing it down slowly.

"Ehhhhhhhh!" He squirmed and put the car in gear. It lunged forward. Roberta threw the fruitcake onto the trunk as he drove away, screeching the tires on the asphalt.

"Asshole!" She yelled and the car was zipping out of the parking lot.

Chapter Thirteen



Roberta stood there, looking down at the pieces of fruit cake. She bundled up, wondering what she should do, and decided to get in her truck. She locked the door and looked out, trying to see if anything was going on, or if that Cadillac was coming back. An elderly woman exited the sliding doors with a blow-up reindeer in her cart and rolled along to the other side of the parking lot. Roberta pulled out another cigarette and shook the pack. Only two left in there. She'd go get more at the gas station. She was angry, squinting her eyes thinking, shoved the cigarette between her lips and lit it, taking a long drag.

The country Christmas music played on the radio and a twinge of hunger stabbed deep in her stomach. She needed to eat something but thought about going back into the store to tell the security guard what had happened. But that might take a while. She'd have to find him first and then do a lot of paperwork. Or she could call the police and make a report. She looked out the window at the security camera mounted high on the corner of the building.

It had caught everything. She knew that because she had seen security footage herself, watched with the manager when someone would run out with a cart full of stolen items instead of paying for them. So, the camera had filmed the whole thing. Her stomach tightened again. What

she wanted right now was dinner. She could just talk to the police and make a report in the morning. It didn't matter now. She wondered which drive-thru to go to and glared at the cracks spread across her windshield.

Chapter Fourteen



Wally had parked at the gas station pump and filled the tank. He was hungry and decided to go in and get a sandwich or something and pulled the beanie down again, making sure his ears were covered. The store was decorated with Christmas lights all along the front counter and behind it was Sammy, a white guy in his sixties with a potbelly and suspenders. He was always there and knew Wally by name.

“Hello, Wally.” He said politely.

He thought Wally was strange.

Wally was known around here as a weirdo, with an animal-like skulking walk and shifty eyes. He was always withered and weak looking, too thin and you could see most of his veins because his skin was so white it was almost translucent. People only saw him in the late hours of the night, and he didn’t talk to anybody. Strangely dressed. He wore women’s clothes, and he always had a hat of some kind, little strings of hair crept down to his neck, and he did something weird with his lips. The top one was always too far down and when he spoke, he covered his mouth. Sammy, the gas station cashier, was sure it was because Wally had bad teeth.

Wally didn’t look at Sammy as he came in and just stood there, looking around. “Hiiiiigh.” His voice stretched

awkwardly as he caught a glance of the nachos on the far wall. He tutttled over to it, his fingers twiddling at his sides. Two Hispanic men walked past him in trucker hats and dirty boots, each getting a six-pack of beer. Wally went over to the nachos and got the flimsy bowl of chips and put them under the cheese dispenser. Yellow queso oozed out and Wally grinned with glee.

Chapter Fifteen



As Roberta pulled into the gas station, she spotted the yellow Cadillac parked there.

“Son of a bitch.” She sped up, almost swiping the front corner of it, slammed the brakes, and parked sideways, blocking it from moving forward. She jumped out of the truck, slammed the door, and headed inside. Two Hispanic men were paying at the counter.

Wally was on the other side of the store, drizzling a pile of nacho chips with cheese. The paper bowl was collapsing in his hand, almost full to the brim with the yellow goo.

“Excuse me!” She yelled.

The guy behind the counter was startled and the two men buying beer turned around to look at her.

Wally swiveled his head and nacho cheese began to pour over his fingers and onto the floor. He looked at her and made no expression, looked back down at his nachos, and started humming. One of the men buying a six-pack paid and left and Roberta stomped over to Wally.

Sammy stopped what he was doing, ready to come from behind the counter. “Is there a problem ma’am?” He asked politely.

“No problem I can’t fix myself. Thanks.” Roberta said. She stood over by Wally who turned his back to her and got

some jalapeños for his nachos. Roberta spoke loudly. "Sir you owe me a new windshield."

Wally began to hiss but didn't look at her.

Roberta winced in annoyance. "Hey, you fucking weirdo." She turned him around.

Wally tightened his upper lip over his teeth to not expose them. But they were extended and ready to bite. "I'm sorry I don't know what you mean." He said nasally.

Roberta gripped her jaw and swung at him, backhanded his nachos knocking them out of his hands and yellow cheese got all on the sleeve of his purple coat.

"Those were my nachos!" he yelled, and his fangs came out, two gleaming pricks of teeth. He flexed his claws at her and hissed.

Chapter Sixteen



“BAM!” Sammy fired a small handgun from behind the counter and was now pointing it at Wally. “Back away ma’am please.” He said to Roberta. Sammy was not blinking and came closer. “You are from hell! You are a demon!”

Wally had his arms up defensively. His beanie was slowly scooting up higher and higher upon his bald head. “No..... I’m from Spring Branch.”

“You are from hell and am sending you back, you devil!” Sammy shot and it blasted through Wally’s coat making a hole on his side.

“My fucking coat!” Wally grabbed his ribs, looking at Sammy with accusing eyes. “And ow!” He fell to the ground.

Chapter Seventeen



Roberta hung up with the police and the Hispanic man put cash on the counter and ran out with the beer.

Roberta yelled at Sammy. "The police are coming! They're on the way!"

Sammy, dripping sweat, was standing at the end of the aisle and Wally was down on the ground she knew, but she could only see Sammy from that angle. He was breathing heavily. His cheeks and ears were flushed bright red and there were dark stains growing under the armpits of his t-shirt.

"Do you need to sit down?" Roberta was a little concerned.

"No. I'm fine." Sammy mumbled. The words were deep breaths, and he could feel his hands were tingling and slick, holding the gun. He did need to sit down but he kept an eye on Wally who was definitely dead. There was no movement in his chest and no pulse beating on his neck. He stared up into the ceiling tile. Those teeth were thin and pointy. They looked like thorns. Sammy wanted to reach down and touch them before the police came. He started to and then thought about it.

He lifted his foot to kick Wally, to make sure he was dead. All at once, Sammy fell back and went to the ground. "BAM!" Firing the gun as he hit the floor. He screamed and

was pulled back behind the aisle where Roberta couldn't see. Sammy began to yelp and there was a crack and he stopped.

"Sammy?" Roberta called.

There was no response. It was quiet for a moment and then a tearing sound and then something that her brain told her was popping knuckles. "BupbupBuPbupBuPbuPbup" Really fast and rapid popping knuckles? Roberta quaked inside. She wanted to run and started to move from behind the counter to leave. Something was raising up. Roberta could see the crown and then the back of Sammy's head up over the aisle. She sighed. "Oh. I didn't know what hap" She stopped. His hair was messy, he turned to face her, his eyes peeking just over the top of the aisle.

"Hey," Roberta said. "The police will be"

Sammy's eyes were looking in two different directions. He stood up higher and she could see his mouth twisted and drooping on one side. Ice shot through Roberta's chest. She couldn't breathe.

Wally's head rose up, peeking above the aisle shelf and Roberta wanted to scream. He stared at her, his eyes piercing through her. Wally and Sammy's heads were side by side and then Sammy dropped down out of sight. Wally started coming down the aisle towards her. She could see his ears now. They were long and pointy ears. Not human. And they wiggled a little as he came around. He stepped out of the aisle and was holding something. It was a spine. White and shaped like a giant zipper. Sammy's head, upside down, dangling at the bottom.

Chapter Eighteen



A trucker came in and stood at the candy bars. "Can I getaaaaa" He looked at Roberta's face. She was glaring towards the other end of the store. He snapped his head to the side to see what she was looking at.

"Oh shit!" He screamed in a high-pitched voice and jammed his hand into his pocket, pulling out a pocket knife, flipping it open. Wally took slow steps towards him, Sammy's head rolling and brushing against the chip display. The trucker jabbed the knife out. "Hey there! Don't! Stay back! Ahh!"

Wally growled and swung the spine like a lasso, hitting the trucker in the face with Sammy's head, knocking him out face down, butt crack exposed. Roberta wanted to run but couldn't, she was frozen. Wally hissed, saliva dripping down from his gums and long points of teeth.

"No! Please! Jesus no!" Roberta put her hands in front of her.

Wally started to swing the spine again. Like a helicopter blade, Sammy's head whirled around. It knocked chips and snacks off the display and Wally took another step towards her. Something crashed, glass breaking to his side. He had hit the gum ball machine. He looked down, eyeballs shaking in his head, he hissed watching the gum balls all roll in different directions, and he began counting.

Roberta stared at him as he dropped the spine and walked over and bent down, crunching broken glass under his shoes. She took a deep breath and listened. He began mumbling and picking up the gum balls. Her legs went loose, and she began to run, got from behind the counter, and passed him as he was organizing them by color, placing them on different tiles of the floor.

Chapter Nineteen



Roberta drove to the police department nearby. She knew where it was because she passed it to go home every night. Frantic, she parked the truck sideways and rushed inside the sliding doors. At the front counter a young guy, maybe in his twenties was on the phone. He motioned her to wait one minute as he typed some information into his computer. "Ok we'll get back to you if anything is updated.....Yes.....Ok.....bye." He looked at her. "Can I help you?"

"Yes." Roberta fumbled. "I'm just coming from the gas station down the street on Fondren." She pointed, heaving desperate breaths. "There was a. Like a. Well. It was. Well. Ugh." She didn't know what to say first.

The police officer looked her up and down. Her red hair was messy. He noticed her Harlow's vest. "Slow down a minute and take your time."

"Ok." Roberta's hands were shaking, and she grabbed the counter. "There was a man. Well, he was a demon or a monster I think and he"

"A demon?" The cop focused on her, narrowing his eyes.

Roberta licked her lips and let go of the counter. She looked at him nervously realizing he didn't believe her. In fact, he thought she was crazy. "You know what?" She

forced a smile. And then a laugh. "I'm joking." She slapped the counter.

The cop raised his eyebrows in relief and smiled. "Oh, you got me."

"Yeah, just joking." Roberta backed away and started to leave. "Well, Merry Christmas." She waved and walked out the sliding door.

The cop watched her get into her truck. "What a crazy lady." He mumbled. "I'm sure I'll see her again."

Roberta peeled out and jumped the curb. Embarrassed, she looked in the rearview, hoping a cop wouldn't follow her to give her a ticket. She realized that was a mistake going there and could only have gone one way. The cops would just arrest her for being unstable. Or maybe they'd leave her alone and let her go home but nothing good would come from saying something like that. It was impossible for them to believe her.

She decided to drive back to the gas station to see if anyone had arrived or to see if that guy was still there. It didn't take long. There was hardly anyone else on the road this time of night. When she got to the corner down the block, where she could see the gas station, two patrol cars were diving up with their lights on. She drove past, searching for the yellow Cadillac with deer antlers, but it wasn't there.

Chapter Twenty



After organizing all the gum balls Wally realized he needed to leave the gas station in a hurry. He stood and saw the cash on the counter, grabbed it, shoved it in his pocket and started to run out, thinking the door was open, and busted through it, shattering the glass. “Ehhh.” He shook his head, brushing glass pebbles from his coat. He kept running to his car, got in, and put it in gear, burning rubber away from the gas pump and into the street. As he drove down the block, he stared at the road blankly, driving as fast as he could to get away from the scene. The sound of police sirens was echoing through the neighborhood behind him. He had left just in time.

He realized how hungry he was. He didn’t get to eat those nachos. He was quite puckish, and had driven only a few blocks when he went past a Whataburger and did a hard U-turn.

Chapter Twenty-One



As Roberta went past the gas station a second time, the cops were going in, stepping through the glass shattered door, guns drawn. She clutched the steering wheel wondering if she should turn around and explain what happened. She had no idea what to do. The cop at the police station didn't believe her. Those cops wouldn't. Maybe she'd be a suspect? A Whataburger was coming up. The orange sign glared tangerine lighting upon her cracked windshield.

The yellow Cadillac was in the drive-thru.

She did a hard U-turn.

Chapter Twenty-Two



The line of cars was quickly moving past the speaker box and to the side windows. Red rear-end lights and clouds of smoke. Inside there were people eating large hamburgers. The windows were hand-painted in vintage Christmas style of simple candy canes and green wreathes with red bows. There was a homeless man talking to himself walking down the street, hot air coming from his lungs and out into the dark.

It was Wally's turn to order, and he pulled up to the menu. He opened his mouth with excitement and looked at the clock on the dashboard. It was after midnight. He flexed his ears with excitement.

A woman's voice garbled over the speaker. *"Welcome to Whataburger, what can I get started for you today?"*

"Do yall serve breakfast now?" He asked meekly.

"Yes, we start serving breakfast at 11 pm."

"Great." Wally clasped his hands together under his chin. "I'd like a honey butter chicken biscuit sandwich."

"Ok. Will that be all?"

There was the sound of tires screeching in the parking lot. Wally puckered his lips with excitement. "And Jalapeno cheddar biscuit with sausage, egg and cheese"

"Do you want the meal?"

"No, just the sandwiches."

"Ok, will that complete your order?"

"I'd like the taquito. Meal. With a coke."

"Bacon or sausage?"

"Ba"

Roberta rammed her truck into the back of Wally's car, sending him lurching forward into the steering wheel. He leaned back and refocused and whipped his head around, looking behind him, the grill of the truck was all he could see in the back window.

The woman on the loud speaker continued. *"So that's a Honey butter chicken biscuit, a jalapeño cheddar biscuit with cheese."*

Wally bent over and opened the car door. He saw Roberta's truck, and the cracked, veined windshield and could see the outline of her mullet sitting inside. "It's you?" Blood spat out of his mouth. "Are you fucking serious?" A line of red crawled past the corner of his lips and dribbled down his chin.

The speaker garbled. *"A bacon taquito meal with a coke."*

He felt something funny, widened his eyes, and grabbed at his mouth. His left tooth had snapped and when he touched it, the bottom half came off, falling into his hand. He looked down at the little point and spat blood onto the concrete.

"That will be eleven seventy-seven. Please drive up to the first window."

"You broke my fucking tooth Bitch!"

Roberta opened her car door. "That ain't the last thing I'll be breakin." She said, swinging one leg out of the truck and came over to him. He honked the horn, hoping the car in front of him would move so that he could leave but he was blocked in.

"Too bad you can't evade the premises. AGAIN." She yanked the beanie off his head.

He pushed his car door open some more and got out, slamming it shut. She leaned in towards him and he began to hiss. Spittle flung out of his mouth hitting her vest. As he arched his back and was ready to bite into her, she turned on the stun gun in her hand and pressed it into the bottom side of his groin tasing his balls.

“EEEEEEEEEEh” He squeaked and convulsed, his eyes fluttering upward. Purple bolts of electricity shot through his veins, and you could see all of his insides, lighting up like a circuit board. Silver-white sparks started shooting out of his mouth and ears.

Roberta pressed the taser harder into his groin, feeling the flesh vibrating and twitching.

Wally screamed “OOOOOOOOHHHHHHH!” his mouth in a perfect oval. Suddenly he looked at her and lunged, she put her other arm up and he bit into it. She kept the taser on him, but he shook her arm. She tried to pull it away, but his fangs were deep in her flesh, digging into the bone. He yanked her around and threw her up and into the brick wall of the building and she rolled into the bushes.

Wally grabbed his crotch and smoke billowed from his ears. “AHHHHH!” he yelled and twitched, trying to get into the car. His hands shook and rattled so much he struggled to grab the door handle. Roberta got to her knees and tried to stand. Wally wobbly-jumped into his car and started to move forward. Roberta hobbled over and as the Cadillac drove off, she gripped a tight hold of one of the reindeer antlers and yanked it out of the window. Wally peeled past the line and shot out the driveway, onto the street, and was gone, screeching his wheels.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Roberta got in her truck and followed. The Cadillac was far ahead and gaining distance, swaying from lane to lane. She pressed on the gas and was now finally catching up, but Wally was still about fifty feet ahead. He slammed on the breaks and turned a corner. Roberta took the turn so tight she almost lost control. The truck swayed from one side of the road to another and then she slowed down. The Cadillac was far in the distance, where she was barely able to see it, way down the alley.

Something made her uneasy. She had never seen this street before. It was very dark. You couldn't see very far ahead and there were no street lamps. It seemed to be a private road. Both sides were lined with high chain-link fences and feral cats skittered in between the shadows.

It looked like a tow yard. She started to notice rows and rows of cars parked in there and something else, a movement sneaking around the outside of her line of vision, skulking and hopping. Something was following her inside the fence, following the truck.

Roberta slowed down and put her head outside the window to see. Something on the other side of the fence was bouncing alongside the truck about thirty feet into the air and it was getting closer. It was purple and flapping. "Holy shit." She said.

It was Wally and he was snarling at her, his purple jacket flapping up and down with each bounce.

Boing! Boing! Boing!

“What the fuck is he doing?” Her head cocked to the side curiously, half her mouth agape, her bottom lip drooping down on one side. Drool creeped out and she could not look away. She was caught in a trance watching him, pulling her into his gaze as he jumped up, high into the circle of the moon, where he would stay there, spreading his arms and legs in floating ballet and then come down again.

Boing!

And back up to the clouds. The purple jacket tails flapping. He would reach the circle of the moon perfectly around him and stare at her, grinning with his dripping-fanged smile. His arms curved up and out gracefully. His legs, springing him up and down.

Boing! Boing!

“What the shit?” Roberta gawked, not looking at the road.

He bounced high above the truck where she lost sight of him when a shadow swept across the hood and he crashed down on the roof, denting it in, just over the top of her head.

Roberta gripped the wheel swung the truck to the side and scraped along the fence, shooting sparks, metal on metal. She got control again and drove down the middle of the road. Wally lay on top of the cab, gripped the sides of the windshield, peaked his face down at her, upside down and glaring, missing half of one fang.

He screamed. “Stop following me bitch!” And punched hard into the windshield, shattering the glass into the cab as he reached inside. She swatted at him, trying to keep one hand on the steering wheel.

He scratched and snatched her neck.

“Khuuuuuuuukhhhh” Roberta tried to breathe but her windpipe was being snapped down. She grabbed his thin, boney arm but couldn’t pull it off her. She shoved her foot down on the break pedal. Wally tumbled forwards, flew off the roof of the truck, and hit the ground rolling.

Roberta gasped for air and clutched her neck, rubbing the scratches, small smears of blood colored her hands.

Wally lay twisted on the dirt road, engulfed in the headlights of the truck. “Ughhhhhhhh.” He breathed and tried to get up.

Roberta slammed her foot on the accelerator. “Fuck you demon!”

Wally put his arm up. The headlights glared him in the face as the grill of the truck raced closer and closer. He stood up and lunged to the side. The truck hit his waist and drug him under the wheels. The truck bounced up and over Wally’s body and he rolled to the side.

His face was bleeding, and his eyes batted around. “Jeeze Louise!” Wally watched the back end of the truck for a moment, his Cadillac was just a few feet away. If he could just get back in his car.

Roberta switched gears and the truck sped backwards towards Wally.

“Wait! Wait!” Wally screamed and the truck drove over him, smashing and rolling him into the ground.

Roberta put the brakes on and looked at the smeared thing in the road in front of her. It was still and smudged, completely flat in spots. There was so much blood.

His head was caved in on one side. The demon was dead.

She said a prayer. “Lord Christmas baby Jesus. Thank you for helping me rid the world of this demon. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you.”

She looked at the thing in the road for a moment watching for any sign of life. A breath moving the rib cage. A finger twitch. Hot air coming from the lungs in the cold.

There was nothing. She put the truck in reverse and drove backwards out of the dimly lit road, watching through the rearview. She watched in front of her too. Just in case the demon was alive and came after her. She got to the other street and took a moment. Focusing her light beams, barely able to show the thing all way back there lying in a bloody mush in the ground. She turned the truck out and decided it was time to head home.

Chapter Twenty-Four



A dozen feral cats, scrawny and timid, peeked carefully from behind the fence at the thing lying in the dirt. They meowed and squeaked, all too nervous to go see what it was. The bravest one, scratched face with matted black and white fur, climbed up and over to investigate the corpse. Excited by the peculiar odor, purring, it sniffed at the blood soaking into the earth.

Wally lay there unmoving, and the cat came to his head, smelling and twitching and curling its tail. It licked and began to nibble at one of his long pointy ears. In a snap of movement, Wally reached up and caught it by the waste, and as it tried to escape it writhed and scratched and meowed. Wally gripped his fingers tight, popping into the bones, breaking its torso and the cat went limp. As the cats watched from a distance Wally was still for a long moment. It became completely dark as the clouds brushed past the moon and an icy wind swept over his still body.

Wally was hard-pressed into the cold ground and as he tried to get up, he could feel his bones cracked and broken, stuck into the dirt. He was twisted and torn open, smudged and bloodied all over. It was hard to breathe. The wind was knocked out of him, and his lungs felt smashed. He took only small, painful breaths. His arms ached and as he started to move his back he didn't feel quite right. He

popped his joints, getting gravel inside some of the open scrapes and ragged flaps of skin. He got on his knees and his back was crooked with a giant tear on the backside of his purple coat. Uncurling his body to stand up, squiggly straight. He kept blinking, unable to open his right eye.

He hunched and hobbled, dragging his feet to the car, flipped the door open, and struggled to get in. Huffing, he sat his butt on the seat and turned in, having to lift his legs one at a time. He pointed the rearview mirror at himself but couldn't see anything and turned on the blacklight overhead. Purple light beamed through the car, and he could see how disfigured he was. The lavender light and jagged shadows revealed that one eye was completely pressed closed, pieces of gravel sticking out of the edge of it. He had blood all over his forehead from a cut pouring down. Half of his face was completely crushed flat, the broken tooth. His bottom lip was open, torn, and hanging off on one side.

His fingers trembled, a few twisted and broken. Weakly, he searched the inside of his coat pocket for the car keys. He found them and started the engine.

Gusts of desperate air wheezed through his lungs. As he slowed and inhaled a deep breath, a long high-pitched whistle teased out. His nose felt funny. Cramped. Wally flared his nostrils and exhaled a shrill toot. He trembled a long bloody finger, closing one side of his nose, and blew out hard. Gravel shot out onto the dashboard. He coughed and the whistling sound was gone.

He put the car in reverse and then saw something in the rearview.

Put the car in park and then got out slowly. Limping, he went back to where he had laid in the road and bent over the dead cat, the lax heap of fur, and reached down to grab it. He went back to the Cadillac and tossed it into the passenger seat for a light snack.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Roberta had sat on her couch, feverishly flipping through the tv to check out the news but there was nothing about the gas station yet. She touched the sore spot on her arm where that freak had bit her. The puncture wound was painful, pussing grooves, penetrated deep down in the muscle. It looked like it was getting puffy. She tightened at the thought of what happened at the drive-thru, of him lifting and throwing her just by his teeth.

She headed to the bathroom mirror and pulled up her shirt to take a look. Along her back, there were long cuts and scrapes but no real wounds, thankfully. She got a Q tip and some Neosporin and dabbed some on where she could, unable to reach most of the area. The spot on her arm suddenly began a shooting hot pain.

The puncture marks had swollen up and the area around them was bulging like a thin-skin, flesh golf ball. In just a few minutes, from the couch to the bathroom, the wound had changed. This was alarming. She went to the kitchen and ripped the silverware drawer open, got a steak knife, still focusing her ears on the television in the living room for any breaking news.

She gripped the knife for a moment, looking down at the clear bubble of flesh, wondering if she was going to do this.

The pain shot again, and the bubble seemed to stretch and grow.

“Fuck. Ok.” Roberta sat at the kitchen table and then got up to go get the pack of cigarettes. She got one and bit it between her teeth. Lit it and took a long drag, looking down at her wound. She put her arm firmly on the table.

She touched the blade to the side of the bubble and caught it with the tip of the knife and pulled up, hoping to cut a small opening. Red, pussy blood sprayed out the side, hitting the door of the microwave.

“Holy shit,” Roberta said, watching as the thick gunk oozed from it. She rushed to the counter and yanked a paper towel, the roll spun wildly in the holder, wheeling out most of them. On the floor, there were multiplying drips of blood, that smeared under her shoes with each step. She dabbed the wound and noticed the strange texture. It wasn’t super runny and wet; it was kind of thicker than blood somehow. The ooze kept coming and she kept dabbing and got more paper towels. She lightly pushed the flesh bubble down. It was a wrinkled piece of skin.

“What?” she said curiously, noticing it had caved in. She pushed down painfully. The spot was sunken in maybe a centimeter. What was happening to her?

Chapter Twenty-Six



Inside the Cadillac, Wally tried to steady himself peeking over the steering wheel, but he was too weak. Looking only from his left eye he tried to navigate but it wasn't going well. A car honked passing him as the Cadillac swerved back into its lane. He passed a familiar street sign. Home was just a few miles away, and it wouldn't take long to get there but he couldn't make it. He didn't have enough energy. He'd need to recover. Fresh blood was the only thing that could help.

He pulled to a side street, drove into a neighborhood, and parked the car in front of a random house. It was a ranch style with an inflated elf in the yard and white Christmas lights along the bushes. Wally kept the engine going and hobbled out to the trunk where he kept his bag of phones, ruffled through them, tossing one out of the bag and then another. They all had cracked screens, and some had blood on them from past victims. He found one he liked and went back into the car where it was warm. He looked weakly at the screen with one eye and tried to turn it on.

It flashed a battery sign. Wally rolled his eye. "Of course." He mumbled, "It's one thing after another."

He stuck out his long, pointy tongue. It was grey and dry and shaking. He pressed it into the plug of the phone but could feel he didn't have much energy. He pulled out the

cigarette lighter from the dashboard and stuck his finger in the socket. That worked a little better, but not as well as it could. He put the phone down. "What the hell." He mumbled. "I am wiped out. Jeeze Louise." He leaned over and reached to the glove box and popped it open, grabbed the iron vitamin pill bottle, rattled it, happy to find it was about half full. He twirled the cap off and it fell to the passenger floorboard.

He stared at the lid, wanting to reach for it out of annoyance but looked away. He tipped the bottle of iron pills up to his mouth and let them fall in, crushing them with his tired teeth. After he'd had about half, he ran his tongue along the inside of his mouth trying to swallow any tiny pieces still stuck along his molars.

He was feeling a little recharged already. He returned his finger to the cigarette lighter socket and put the phone on his tongue. After a few seconds, it came on. He looked at it. The phone was asking for a passcode. Wally griped. He barely had the energy. He put the phone up to his cheek and then to his nose and closed his eye. Removing all thoughts, only feeling, he sniffed it. No thoughts, blanking his mind. He pressed the buttons, and the phone was unlocked.

He was feeling a little better but needed something to take home. After all, he still hadn't eaten. He looked at the house he'd parked next to and called a 24-hour taqueria down the street.

"Hola." He said in a soft voice. "Can I get a delivery to my house please?"

The man on the other end explained that the restaurant didn't deliver.

"I can give you 100 if you do."

The man agreed. Wally ordered some food and hung up.

While he sat there waiting, he found some Christmas music and took what was left of the iron pills, digging the

back of his teeth with his fingernail while listening to a Motown version of Silent Night.

After about 15 minutes a Toyota pulled up to the curb in front of him. The driver got out of his car and started to walk up the sidewalk carrying plastic bags of hot Mexican food. Wally silently got out and followed him from behind. The man stopped for a moment, sensing something near him and turned around. As he took in a squeaking gasp Wally covered his mouth. The man stared and screamed inside the cup of Wally's hand, but no sound came out. He was terrified, struck by the face of horror, half caved in and covered in blood, frayed, tattered cloth-like pieces of loose skin hanging down over his cheek, exposing parts of his skull. Wally looked dead and there was gore all over him. The Hispanic man mumbled something, but Wally couldn't understand. He tried again and then started squealing.

In one motion, Wally wrapped his arm around his neck and pulled him backwards. The man flailed, dropping the bags and chips and salsa spilled out into the grass.

Wally yanked him around like a doll. The man tried to scream but there was no sound, only kicking and punching back but Wally swayed out of reach from every motion. He pulled the man in tighter, closer against him, squeezing his neck until he finally went lax. Wally looked around to see if anyone had looked out their windows. No one was watching. He huffed and wheezed as he pulled him backwards with tiny, exhausted steps dragging him to the car and got him in the front seat.

He went back to the sidewalk and grabbed the bags of food. Rice and beans were splattered loose, inside the plastic. He bent down to collect the bag of chips, leaving the rest of it on the yard, and put it all in the back floorboard. He pulled the cellphone from his pocket, broke it in half, and chucked it down the sewer drain.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Roberta tried to stop touching the bandage on her arm, but it ached so much. The white gauze had gone a sticky, sopping pink color where it covered the wound and it was starting to smell. She didn't recognize the smell but something about it was familiar. It was like salt and cheese. She put it to her nose. "Muenster?" She winced and her stomach buckled down. "That can't be good"

She sat there, wondering what to do. She could go to the emergency room, but it would be hours before anyone would see her. She could call her sister, Debra Sue, who always had the latest info on holistic cures. She looked over at the clock in the kitchen. It was about 2 AM, too late to call. But this was serious. She needed to fix this now or else she might have to go to the ER, even if that meant waiting there all night. She got on her cell phone, put it on speaker, and dialed Debra Sue. After a few rings, she picked up.

"This better be good." She grunted and cleared her throat, there was a tv on somewhere in the background.

"It is. I need help.....I got hurt."

Debra Sue looked at the clock through her dark bedroom. The light of the tv bounced along the walls. "What happened?"

Roberta had to think fast. What could she say? "A dog bit me."

"A dog? Ok."

"Bit me real bad."

Debra snuggled tight into her covers. "Ok."

"So, what do I do about it?"

Debra mumbled almost inaudible. "Go to the ER and get checked out. You don't want to get rabies."

"I think I got worse than that."

"Worse than rabies?" Debra Sue chuckled.

"Actually. I need to tell you something, but you have to believe me."

"What?" Debra grunted, she sounded like she was falling back asleep.

"It was a demon..... For real..... Like a demon man. That's what bit me on my arm. It's really bad. I think I should see a priest or something."

There was a long pause.

"Debbie?"

"What." She grunted.

"Do you believe me?"

"Hell no. It was probably a crack head. I saw one yesterday that was"

"No. It wasn't." Roberta tightened her fist and hit the arm of the couch. She sighed, "Do you have like a home remedy you could tell me about? Should I rub an onion on it? Or lemon or something? I got Chamomile tea."

"It was a crack head don't worry."

"This was not a real person." Roberta squeaked. "This guy was a demon."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I don't. But he was real strong and he pulled this guy's head"

"Just go to the ER," Debra mumbled. "They'll give you a rabies shot."

"I don't need whatever they'll give me at the hospital. I need something better."

Debbie rolled her eyes. "Like what?"

"I need your help in prayer."

Debbie squinted, "You want me to pray with you?"

"Yes, please." Roberta's voice cracked. She could feel tears collecting behind her eyes, ready to come out.

"Ok fine" Debbie griped, snuggling deeper into her warm blankets.

"Ok. We'll do The Lord's Prayer."

"Ok."

"On three."

"Ok." Debbie Sue mumbled.

"One.....two.....three."

"Ourfatherwhoartinheavenhallowed" Debbie Sue sped through The Lord's Prayer. "namethykingdomcome" so fast it was hard to keep up. "Earthasitisinheavengiveus"

"Thy will be done"

"butdeliverusfromevilforthyneisthekingdom"

"As we forgive"

"foreverandeveramen." Debra Sue readjusted her blanket tight over her shoulders.

"In Jesus Christ's name, we pray amen." Roberta felt deflated.

"Is that good?"

"Could we do it again?" Roberta said softly.

"I have to go back to sleep. Goodnight. Go. To. The ER."

"But"

"Get a rabies shot." She hung up.

Roberta looked at the phone screen as it went black.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Wally tore into the quesadilla, chewing enthusiastically. Diced tomatoes spilled onto his lap, and he grunted with annoyance. “I said.” He hit the delivery man hunched over in the passenger seat. “No! Pico!” The man slumped over, head bobbing against the window. Wally got another slice of quesadilla from the box sitting in the man’s lap. Carefully watching the road, he precariously dipped it in the small cup of sour cream, trying not to let it drip, and brought it to his mouth.

The dizziness from hunger was gone now that he had finally eaten something, but he still felt off. He needed more. They hit a stoplight on Richmond Ave. Wally could see a car parked next to him but knew they couldn’t see a thing inside the Cadillac. They couldn’t see his passenger with his head pressed against his window and they couldn’t see Wally. His stomach growled and he had polished off the last of the quesadilla. They began driving again and Wally licked his fingers. He looked at the man leaning over, thinking of what part he wanted to take.

“I wanna taste it,” he whispered.

They drove another block and stopped at the stoplight where a homeless man was standing on the median with a cup of change. From that angle, he could see inside through the windshield, but Wally didn’t care. Wally

unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned over to his passed-out passenger. The homeless man watched. He could tell something wasn't quite right. Wally grabbed the man's head and turned his face. He made a small mumbling noise but didn't wake. Wally got closer, face to face. He sniffed. "I wanna taste it."

Wally bit down hard on the man's nose until the flesh sprang open. He pulled and yanked his head, tearing the nose off. Blood sprayed into the windshield. The homeless man threw his hands to his cheeks and screamed and ran across the street.

The light changed to green, and Wally drove, chewing the nose on one side of his mouth.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Roberta sat there in disbelief. Time seemed to be stretching late into the night and the living room felt more empty somehow. She was more alone right now than ever in her whole life. It was like she lived completely alone on the planet. Like no one else was here at all. Her sister didn't believe her. The thought tumbled like shoes in a dryer, over and over. She was growing more upset the more she thought about it.

The worst part, the part that stuck and couldn't unclog or move and didn't make sense, was that Roberta had always been an honest person. And her sister knew this. And. She had never lied. And her sister knew this. And. She had never lied to her sister before. Ever. So why didn't she believe her?

The sharp pain under the bandage fired through her arm again. She didn't dare look at it to see what was underneath. She wanted to know what to do. Who could she talk to? She considered calling her minister. He could deal with something evil but maybe he wouldn't believe her either. Even if they did believe her what would they do? What could be done? The Lord's Prayer didn't seem to be working yet. Her arm was hurting more by the minute.

She focused on the tv to see if what had happened at the gas station had made the news yet.

“Holy shit.”

And there it was. It finally made the news. On the tv the gas station was sectioned off with those streams of plastic yellow police tape and the front wall of the building was blue flashes, lit up by patrol lights. In the background, you could see someone wheeling out a gurney with a body bag and the news anchor was interviewing a middle-aged black guy with a beanie on.

The reporter was a pretty black woman in a white dress shirt. She spoke into the microphone. “So, you weren’t here for this incident?”

“No. I wasn’t. But I know what it was.” The man said matter-of-factly.

“Can you elaborate for us?”

“Yeah, it was a werewolf.”

The anchorwoman gave him a blank look.

The man threw his hands up. “I swear to god. I know I sound crazy, but I’ve seen it a couple times already. And everybody knows there’s a werewolf around here.

“Are you sure that’s what you’re seeing?”

“Yes. I swear. Hand to god.”

Another man walked past in the background “I see it too.” He walked over to them.

The anchorwoman seemed slightly irritated but kept her composure. “You’ve also been seeing this?”

“Yes. We’ve all seen it. A lot of us have. Last week it was driving a Monte Carlo.”

The news anchor sighed.

“We swear to god.”

“A black one” The other guy chimed in.

“Yeah. Yeah. A black one. A black Monte Carlo.”

“Oh, the werewolf can drive?” The news anchor teased.

“Yeah. You don’t believe me? I saw what I saw. You can tell your damn tv station” he pointed at the camera. “to print that in the morning paper. I saw. What. I. Saw. Fuck.”

Roberta shook her head. She was angry. No one knew what happened at the gas station. And no matter who she told, she would just as crazy as the guy on tv. She turned it off and wanted to cry.

The pain in her arm flashed white hot and she grabbed it, trying not to touch it too hard. "What the hell do I do now?" She said, "Think Roberta. Think!"

It took a minute for an idea to form.

She would go back to the alley. She needed to show them his body. She'd call the police to go get the body and they'd look at the cameras at the gas station and see that it was him. Then they could do an autopsy and see that he wasn't a normal man and then she could get treated for her arm. That would work.

It was the only way this could work.

Roberta grabbed her keys, locked up, and left. She got in the truck and hurried. If she could get there really quick, then maybe her arm wouldn't get too bad. She took the freeway and headed back towards the tow yard, trying to remember the exact turn. When she came down the street, she saw it and didn't slow down fast enough. The road was empty because it was so late, so she just stopped the truck and drove backwards, turning down that same road.

Her headlights were the only light she had now. The moon had changed positions so even that wasn't shining down that good anymore. Alley cats climbed the fence as she went, and she drove slower. The Cadillac wasn't visible yet. She was sure it was still too far ahead so she kept on driving but as she reached a dead end, she realized something awful. Her mouth went sand-dry and her heart pounded. She tried to calm down.

The Cadillac was gone. She didn't see the demon's body.

Somehow, the demon man survived, and he was loose somewhere.

Chapter Thirty



As Wally arrived at the house, he spotted the front window and the lights out at the top of it. "God damnit!" He hit the steering wheel. "Son of a bitch! I forgot the fucking Christmas lights!"

He parked in the garage and went around to the other side and got the delivery guy out, dropping him on the concrete floor. Shut the car door and grabbed him by the

"I wanna taste it" he stared at the man's cheeks. There was blood on them and the gape from his missing nose was thick globs of red that had started to clump a little. Wally bent down over him and licked his cheek. "I wanna taste. I wanna taste." Wally purred and then he grunted. "No! First things first." he shook his head. "Jeeze! I get so sidetracked all the time." He grabbed the ankles and yanked them up to his chest. "Maybellene!" he yelled.

The screechy sound of a bat flew past the top of the garage. He waited a minute for a response from Maybellene, but there was nothing, so he gave up on any assistance and started to drag the man out of the garage. Hauling him across the walkway through the backyard was hard and taxing. As Wally hunched and pulled a freezing wind blew past him, hitting like ice needles into the open cavern of his face. He could feel the insides of his skull aching with the brisk air. He inhaled sharply, filling his

mouth with decongestion, and spit it out into the grass, flapping his broken lip.

The man twitched at his hands and began blinking. He was starting to wake up. "Wait" he mumbled.

Wally dragged him over the back step and through the back door, where he slid easier across the linoleum in the kitchen. He pulled him through the hall to the living room and got to the stairs.

"Please." The man said softly, trying to open his eyes.

Wally started to panic. "Mabyabilne!"

M

Someone calls my name from within my home.

The man moved his legs but only a little and Wally slowly started going up the stairs backwards gripping his ankles. The man grabbed, reached the banister. He got his hand stuck in the red tinsel and yanked it, frantically hanging on and unraveling it, taking it with them. Wally pulled and up and up, hitting the man's head along every step of the stairs. Finally, they arrived at the top and Wally fell to his butt.

"Please." The man grabbed at his nose. "Where am I?" He twisted his head, looked around, and touched his face again. "Where's my nose?"

Wally stood up and began dragging him down the hall.

"Where is my nose?" The man said in a small frantic peep. "Where is my nose?"

Wally pulled him into the bathroom, across the smooth, pink tile floor, and got him to the clawfoot tub. The room was a vintage 60s design like the rest of the house, with bubble gum tile from over fifty years ago and a stretching high ceiling. A long, rusted rail mounted the center of the ceiling that guided a set of chains and pullies. Wally took off his coat and looked at it, poking his finger through the

rip in the fabric. He considered that it was completely ruined but after a moment, he decided to just take it to the tailor and get it fixed. It fit him so well he didn't dare throw it away.

He placed the jacket delicately across the vanity chair and got the hook and chain hanging from one side of the wall and pulled it over. The wheels along the ceiling maneuvered across the rail up there, making a loud squeaking noise, and the man began to whimper.

Wally pulled the man's legs up onto the hook, twisting his shoes a little, and got his feet snugly attached with some rope. He went to the other side of the room and put his hand against the wall, pulling out a hidden metal crank and started turning it. The chains tightened and started pulling the man upwards by his feet.

As he hung upside down, he twisted at the waist, hoping to get his feet out of the hook. He clawed at the floor uselessly until it was out of reach. He yanked his body, writhing and squealing. Change fell out of his pockets, clattering along the pink tile.

Wally's eyes glittered. "Oh boy." He clasped his hands and sculked to another corner of the room where he retrieved a small glass table on wheels. It had large glass jars that rattled together as he glided it over. There were many of them, all with different things. One was watches and necklaces. One was earrings. One was keys. One was rings, another was change. One that had random things in it like bottle caps, and pieces of gum and candy wrappers. And the big one was all kinds of folded pieces of paper.

Wally bent over next to the man picking up the coins.

"You don't have to do this. I want to go home. Please. Just let me go" He reached for him grabbing his shirt.

Wally pulled his hand off and shoved him in the stomach and he glided across the room, twirling on the chain.

"Ehhhhh!" The man yelled. Batting his arms trying to reach anything.

Wally stood and looked at the collection in his palm, counting it with his long finger. "Seventy-six cents." He dropped it in the change jar. "What else you got?" Wally walked over, hunching his back like he would pounce. He twiddled his fingernails along his pants as he got closer.

The man reached for him. "Please. I can pay you whatever you want."

Wally slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me." He looked down at the man's wrists. There was no watch or bracelet to take. He reached in his pockets, prodding with his fingers, and found something. "Oh cool. What is this?" He pulled out a crumpled receipt and unfolded it. "What is it?"

"It's just a receipt." The man drooled and bloody mucus had started coming out of the gape where his nose used to be.

"Oh Papa's!" Wally's eyes danced. "I love it there. Great barbeque."

"I can get you whatever you want. Just let me go." The man sobbed. His shirt was drooping down now showing his bare chest and covering his chin.

"Great mac and cheese." Wally put the receipt in the jar with the papers. "I like my brisket wet."

The man started sobbing as Wally went over to the vanity and stuck his hand in a jar, pulling out a bath bomb. "Lots of sauce." He smelled it. Not quite what he wanted, he reached in the jar and got another and smelled that one. Coconut and vanilla. "Yum."

The hanging man's face was going burgundy, and his eyes were popping with the pressure from being upside down. Drool and red snot lined from his mouth to his forehead. A long string of cherry color was dangling from his hair almost touching the floor. He started swaying side to side, desperate to get loose.

Wally paid him no attention, still going through the bath bombs, smelling each one. "Barbara!" he called to the A.I.

speaker. "What's the temperature outside?"

Barbara lit up.
"RIGHT NOW, IT IS 30 DEGREES."
"HAVE A GREAT NIGHT, WALLY."

"Oh, I will." Wally sneered plucking out a white bath bomb that smelled like peppermint ice cream.

The man was losing momentum and getting tired. He swung and squealed. His shirt was covering his face now. "Please let me go. I don't want you to hurt me."

Wally looked over at him, cocking his head, and mimicked his whining as he got undressed. His boney, pale frame glittered with specks of blood and pieces of gravel, and he had a few points of bone sticking out of his white flesh. He poked at one loose bone jutting out of his chest, wiggling it playfully.

Wally smiled "Barbara! Play some music!"

Barbara started playing a mellow tune.
A new song he hadn't heard before echoed through the
speakers.

Wally walked over to the man and pulled his shirt up to his chin to see his face. The man looked confused at him, noticing he was naked and tried to look away. Wally grabbed him by the belt and pulled him a few feet to hang over the tub. Wally stood there still, looking at him for a moment. The man tried not to stare at his naked body but saw that he was emaciated and overly pale and translucent, revealing the map of blue veins behind his skin. He had a yellowish-looking bone piercing out from his rib cage.

"I want to smell it." Wally quacked softly. He took a step towards him, and the man peed his pants. Wally bent over

and the man turned his head not to brush against his naked legs as Wally sniffed at his exposed stomach.

"I want to live!" He let out a scream.

Wally pulled away and turned on the tub's faucet. Hot, steaming water poured out.

The hanging man wiggled and shrieked and tried to get loose of the hook that held his feet.

Barbara started playing *Meet Me At Our Spot*.

Wally walked away and went to the vanity and opened a drawer plucking out a straight razor. "Barabara! Turn it up!"

"No!" The man reached out to Wally and began to spin, the hook tightening around his ankles. "No! Please! No."

Wally came back over to the tub.

"No. No. No!" The man grabbed hold of the sides of the tub and mumbled and bubbled spit down his face. Red snot shot out of the open hole of his nose, flecking wet on Wally's chest. "Please!"

Wally held the blade out and admired the gleam of light dancing on the man's face, reflecting light slanted across his eye.

"No please no no no no no no"

Wally sang in a stretched nasally voice "Caught a vibe" and slashed the man's throat.

Blood rushed out of the line and down the man's face into the tub. Wally bent down and brushed his hand through the water to check the temperature and threw in the bath bomb as the music continued. He pushed the man over a few feet to hang at the foot of the tub. A thin line of blood streamed down into the water. Wally put one leg and

then the other, flexing his ears. He grabbed the sides and lowered himself into the pile of bubbles and relaxed.

His joints popped and he sighed with exhausted relief, closing his eyes, resting them, enjoying the steam as the scent of peppermint and vanilla fogged the bathroom. The sharp yellow bone poking out from his rib started to pull back into his body and the skin on his chest contracted and tightened, sealing and healing the wound. The dangle of his broken lip started to pull itself together and the side of his face was growing a fresh cheekbone as Silver Bells started to play, echoing along the pink bathroom tile.

Chapter Thirty-One



M

***There is music inside the house.
I quite enjoy it.***

Chapter Thirty-Two



When Roberta arrived home it was in that instant when all fear evaporated. She was the only one who could handle this. She had to kill this thing herself. And she knew just what she was going to do. She went through the bedroom and into the closet, opened the door to the gun cabinet, and got the shotgun. She gripped it tight in her hands, feeling strong and in control.

It was a basic shotgun, black barrel with a wooden stock. *Motherfucker* was engraved above the trigger. She clenched her teeth and looked down at her weeping bandage. It had gone pink and gooey, and she didn't want to mess with it anymore. She got the box of bullets, loaded *Motherfucker*, and put the rest in her jacket pocket.

She put her boots on and headed out the door, got in the truck, and drove towards Harlow's.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Wally stepped out of the tub onto the pink tile. He grabbed his white bathrobe and closed it around himself and got a towel to wrap atop his bald head. Little dots of blood smeared under his wet feet as he made his way to the mirror. He flicked on the blacklight above it and wiped away the steam to see his face had grown back. His lips curled up in a satisfied smirk and he wrote *Christmas Cheer* along the foggy glass.

He focused on the broken tooth which looked much better now, almost completely healed. He touched it, feeling the smooth line in his skin.

Wally went to his bedroom and found his favorite pair of Christmas-time PJs. Red flannel with snowflakes. He put that on and got his snowman house robe to wear and put on his fuzzy shoes. He knocked on Maybellene's bedroom door and went inside. "Maybellene.....do you want some hot cocoa?" He said to her in the dark. "I've had one hell of a night. I'm just exhausted and you know a hot chocolate is just what I need. Can I make you one?"

M

There is that nasaly voice again. Wally my dear friend. He is talking to me. I am going back to sleep now.

Wally looked at her through the cavernous dark as she lay there still and warm under a cozy pile of blankets. "I'll bring you one in a bit sweetheart."

He shut the door and opened it again, poking his head back inside the black, dank room. "Love ya."

Wally went down the hall admiring the view of the living room from the staircase. So Christmasy with the tree and the tinsel on the staircase. "Oh Woah." He said noticing the tinsel on the floor of the stairs that had come undone. He put it back into place, wrapping it along the banister as he went down. "Barbara!" Wally screeched. "Play some Christmas music!"

*"OK."
"SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN BY THE
SUPREMES."*

As the music played Wally headed into the kitchen to make hot cocoa. He started a pot with boiling milk and pulled out two mugs from the cabinet. One was Charlie brown Christmas and the other one was a black Santa Claus. He went to the tv and searched Hulu for something good, deciding to watch the show Fargo, one of his favorites.

He returned to the kitchen and added shaved chocolate to the pot and stirred, filled his cup and got the tin of cookies meant to go to the Millers, tore the lid off, and went to the living room. He put the cookies on the coffee table and caught a glimpse of the Christmas lights outside. He did a tiny clap with his hands and looked out the front

window into his neighborhood, pulling the curtain all the way open to admire the scene.

It was wonderful. Everyone's house had decorations, and everything was so festive with all the Christmas lights. Molly Fitzpatrick's house across the way was notably the best looking and Wally seethed a little. He flicked his tongue across the line where his fang had grown back, gripping the black Santa mug in his hand, and took a small, hot sip.

He stared at Molly Fitzpatrick's house, through her window and into her living room. The tree was huge and loud and wonderful. Wally grunted with annoyance and looked down at the mug of cocoa. And then back out the window. "I bet I make better cocoa than her. I bet I do!" he shot away from the window and went into the kitchen, slamming the mug on the counter. He went into the pantry and found a cinnamon stick, flew open the fridge, and got the whipped cream from the door. He went back to the pantry and got marshmallows and put it all on the counter. Went back to the pantry and found M&Ms. "Fuck you Molly Fitzpatrick. I make the best hot cocoa! I do! I'll have the best hot chocolate anyone's ever had. It will be the best one that bitch has ever seen." he said.

The song had switched to Jingle Bell Rock and Wally put the M&Ms in a zip lock bag and crushed them. He got a candy cane off the counter and unwrapped it.

Chapter Thirty-Four



As Roberta drove back to work, her teeth rattled with the frigid blast of air coming in through the smashed hole of the broken windshield. Her hair was blown back, and her cheeks were bright red and completely numb. Her nose had started to run. She was relieved to get off the freeway where she wasn't driving so fast and the wind wasn't blowing so hard, directly on her. She pulled up at Harlow's. It was even more empty than before but that was normal. Almost no one shopped in the middle of the night. She marched through the parking lot, rubbing her hands together, trying to warm them up. Al, the security guy, was standing by the door.

"Back again Roberta?" He said.

"Yep. I need to get something." she pushed her glasses higher on her nose and went past him. The fluorescent lights were very bright and hurt her eyes. She squinted, making her way to check out # 2.

Kermit was restocking bags and looked up at her. His choppy blonde bangs swooped to one side. "What are you doing back Berta? Here to cause some shit?"

"Sure am." She said looking past him, focused on check out #2."

"Well fuck you," Kermit said, flinching and taking a step back as she went past.

Roberta got to the checkout and went around, reaching into the shelf behind the counter where she found the box of forms for the discount card. She pulled them out and went through several and then she found what she was looking for.

***Wallyfred Dolezal
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Chapter Thirty-Five



Wally was cozy and warm in his flannel PJs and snowman robe. He got comfortable and propped his feet on the coffee table. On his right foot, a long toenail poked out through the worn hole of his house slippers. Fargo was playing on the tv, and he looked over at the fireplace, wondering if he should light it or not. He got on his phone again and went to Instagram to Molly Fitzpatrick's page. She had posted a bunch of photos today of her house newly decorated with even more Christmas stuff.

Wally mumbled. "I'll show you who's having a better Christmas season. I am!" He laughed, reaching for the tray he had set up. It was a decorative tin plate of the Miller's cookies, snickerdoodles and chocolate chip and Mexican wedding cookies all arranged in a spiral, and his hot chocolate, the black Santa mug with a giant swirl of whipped cream, crushed M&Ms, a cinnamon stick, and chocolate shavings. He angled himself to get the tray, the fireplace mantle with the stockings, and his cozy house slippers and the tv in the shot, focusing the camera on the hot chocolate.

After a few tries, he got the best picture and posted it to Instagram. He put the camera down and enjoyed Fargo. He took a sip of cocoa and licked the extra whipped cream from his lip and started the tin of Christmas cookies. He

had one after another. "Jeeze. I didn't know I was so hungry." He said gobbling a whole chocolate chip cookie, stuffing it in his mouth. Brown sugary crumbs cascaded down to his robe as he shoved in cookie after cookie, watching the tv as he chewed. He took another sip of cocoa and shoved another cookie in his mouth. They were delicious, better than he had expected. He started on the Mexican wedding cookies and the white powdery sugar-coated his lips.

He took another sip of cocoa and had another cookie and another and another. He watched Fargo and reached into the tin and it was empty. "Holy shit! I finished the whole thing. Jeezus. I was fucking hungry." He licked his lips, delighted to find the powdered sugar. "Well, maybe I should go to the fridge and have something substantial."

Wally glared at the tv for a moment and then everything went black. He laid back, head tilted up, and crumb-coated drool peeked from the corners of his mouth as he drifted into a sugar dream.

Chapter Thirty-Six



WALLY IS IN A BLACK ROOM. NOTHING IS IN IT. A SPOTLIGHT SHINES DOWN OVER HIM. SOMEONE IS WALKING TOWARDS HIM. IT IS A VERY LARGE MAN WITH BROAD SHOULDERS AND STRAIGHT POSTURE. HIS STEPS ARE FIRM AND CLUNKY. WALLY SEES A TALL HAT AND HIS EYES LIGHT UP WITH EXCITEMENT AND JOY.

IT IS MR. NUTCRACKER.

"MR. NUTCRACKER!" WALLY CHIRPS, CLASPING HIS HANDS TOGETHER UNDER HIS CHIN. "YOU'VE COME TO SEE ME." HE SAYS NASALLY.

MR. NUTCRACKER IS STANDING TALL IN FRONT OF HIM. HIS WOODEN TEETH ARE A GIANT SMILE. HIS MUSTACHE IS LARGE, THICK, AND BUSHY. HE STARES AT WALLY WITH BIG PIERCING BLUE EYES. HIS HAT IS TALL AND THE FUR ON IT LOOKS VERY SOFT. MR. NUTCRACKER PUTS HIS ARMS STRAIGHT OUT AND WALLY STEPS CLOSER.

"DO YOU WANT ME TO?" WALLY ASKS MEEKLY.

MR. NUTCRACKER STARES DOWN AT HIM, SMILING.

WALLY JUMPS INTO HIS ARMS AND GRABS HIM AT THE NECK. HE SIGHS, FEELING SAFE AS HE IS HELD LIKE A BABY. "YOU'RE SO STRONG," WALLY SAYS LOOKING UP AT HIS MUSTACHE.

HE TOUCHES IT. "YOUR MUSTACHE IS SO SOFT."

MR. NUTCRACKER SMILES.

THERE IS A MISTLETOE HANGING OVER THEM.

WALLY BLUSHES AND PRESSES HIS FACE INTO MR. NUTCRACKER'S FIRM WOODEN CHEST. HE LOOKS UP AT HIM SHYLY. "WE'RE UNDER THE MISTLETOE." HE QUACKS.

WALLY SITS UP A LITTLE.

MR. NUTCRACKER SMILES DOWN AT HIM. WALLY AND MR. NUTCRACKER ARE FACE TO FACE, AND THEY GET CLOSER.

THERE IS A KNOCK AT THE DOOR.

WALLY AND MR. NUTCRACKER TURN THEIR HEADS.

THE DOOR FLIES OPEN. MOLLY FITZPATRICK IS STANDING RIGHT NEXT TO THEM. SHE IS WEARING A GLITTERY CHRISTMAS SWEATER. ITS LIGHTS ARE FLASHING IN A DOTTING RHYTHM.

WALLY SNEERS.

"THE NUTCRACKER BELONGS TO ME!" MOLLY SHOUTS AND HER VOICE ECHOES.

WALLY GRABS MR. NUTCRACKER AND CLIMBS HIGHER ON HIS CHEST. "NO! PLEASE! HE'S MINE. CAN'T HE STAY WITH ME?"

MOLLY SHAKES HER HEAD. "NO! HE'S MINE! GIVE HIM TO ME!" SHE REACHES.

MR. NUTCRACKER TAKES A STEP BACK, HOLDING WALLY FIRMLY IN HIS ARMS. WALLY GRABS HIS NECK. "NO!" HE WAILS.

MOLLY FITZPATRICK BEGINS TO LAUGH. "GIVE HIM TO ME! HE'S MINE!" SHE COMMANDS.

WALLY THROWS HIS ARM OUT, STRETCHING HIS FINGERS. "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" HE SCREAMS.

THERE'S A KNOCK AT THE DOOR.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



There was knocking at the door. Wally sat up with a jolt, dropping the cookie tin out of his lap. He perked his ears and looked at the clock. It was past 4 AM. "Who is it?" He grabbed his black Santa mug to take a sip of cocoa.

There was another knock, this one harder.

He called in a cheery tone. "Maybellene!" he shouted. "Did you order take out?"

Roberta stood on the other side of the door holding Motherfucker. She pulled the trigger and blasted through it, splatting wood into the living room. What was left of the door frame fell inwards.

Roberta stood there, outlined by the Christmas lights outside. "It's Roberta, remember me?" She yelled into the living room. Wally was trembling, holding his mug of hot cocoa, the whipped cream had fallen off the side into his lap and the black Santa looked scared. Wally screeched, "You ruined my door!"

"I'm here to give you above and beyond customer service!" she cocked the shotgun and aimed it at Wally. He whipped down onto the floor as she shot into the back of the chair. The gun blasted through the top of it. Wally scurried, crawling through the living room. He got to the tree and hid behind it as Roberta cocked the gun again.

Wally shouted, “Not the treeeeeeee!” and darted to the left. She shot and blasted a hole the size of a bowling ball through the wall. He darted down the hall and turned a corner to the kitchen. She came through the living room and followed him around the hall and into the kitchen where he had disappeared. She noticed the mess of dishes and things on the counter. She looked around the room carefully. All the clutter was distracting and there was Christmas music playing from all over the house. She struggled to focus.

Wally silently stepped behind the coat rack and waited by the back door. She aimed the gun and with slow steps looked around and behind her, finding nothing. She continued through the room and walked past him. He lunged out and jumped on her back. She jolted up and shot into the ceiling, and he jumped off, across the room.

She cocked the gun and aimed it at him as he sprinted into the living room, and she raced after him. She shot and blasted through the banister of the stairs. Red and green tinsel fluttered onto the carpet. He ran to the chimney. She cocked the gun and aimed as he dove and scurried, his feet disappeared up into the chimney and out of sight. She went over, knocking the Christmas stockings off the mantel and got on her knees, and hunkered down to look up into it. It was completely dark with the stars of the night sky visible at the top. He was gone already.

Roberta stood and looked around the living room. So many decorations. The tree was glowing multicolored lights and had dangling candy canes. She felt drawn to it and grabbed one, looked at it. “How dare this demon from hell desecrate Christmas!” She threw the candy cane across the room, took a step, and kicked the piece of the chair she had shot up earlier. There was a cookie tin on the floor. The living room was dated, with furniture from the 60s. It reminded her of her grandma’s house.

She went to the banister and started up the stairs, taking one careful step at a time, aiming the barrel of the shotgun in front of her, in case something jumped out.

At the top, she turned down a dark hallway. She reached out, feeling along the wall, but couldn't find a light switch. Something made a noise and she jerked, aiming the shotgun towards the sound. Something was there but she couldn't see it. Her eyes strained in the dark, desperate to find any form to focus on but there was nothing but black.

Roberta was ready to fire.

The thing was barely audible, and it was moving closer. All at once, it came darting towards her and she fired the shotgun. A shadow brushed past her leg, and she could see it was a black cat running down the hall and it flitted down the stairs.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



She finally found the hall light and flicked it on. The smell of hot led hit her nose. She knew something was bleeding. Her arm stung at the thought. She had forgotten all about it, but with the shock of that smell, she began to think and feel. It hurt and ached. It was soggy and seeping through the jacket sleeve. She leaned the shotgun on the wall and listened for any movement in the house. It was completely still. No one else was in there with her. She felt safe for the moment.

She took her jacket off. Carefully and slowly, she began the process of rolling up the sleeve of her shirt and looked down at the bandage. The gauze was loose and soaked pink and wet with gobs of red. She didn't dare touch it as the wound pulsed rapidly under the weeping cloth. She covered it up again and tried to ignore the feeling of it throbbing through the shirt.

She got the gun in her hands again and went into what looked like a bathroom. It was muggy in there. It smelled like someone just took a shower. The mirror had steam around the corners, and the words *Christmas cheer* had been written on it.

The flooring was old. It was bubble gum pink with black outlining the edges of the room. "Oh shit!" she gasped, seeing the man hanging upside down from chains bled out

like a stuck animal over the tub. There was a hole in the middle of his face. A big gash wound. Dried blood had poured down from it. His neck had an open line across it and blood had colored his face.

Some was still dripping from his hair into the tub. She darted her eyes around the room. Aside from the chains and rails along the ceiling, it was a normal bathroom. There was a crank on the wall for the chains. She went over to the man, his eyes bulging downward. She leaned down to meet his gaze. "Sir? Hello?"

He gave no response, just stared into empty space.

She stood up nervously unsure of what to do. She felt in her pocket and pulled out her phone. She turned on the camera and aimed the phone at the man and then decided to do a selfie instead. She put her head next to his and tried to get the angle right, trying to show that he was hanging from chains. This photo was a good idea. To prove she was there. She took one picture and then another and sent it to her sister and then the phone died.

"Fuck! Are you fucking kidding me?"

She thought she heard a noise and looked at the hanging man.

"Hello?" She said to him.

There was no answer. She touched him on the side of his neck just to make sure he was dead. He was slightly warm. She lurched back.

The body being a little warm scared her even more. He had been killed recently. The steam was curling her red hair and her glasses were fogging around the edges. Cautiously, she backed out of the bathroom, staring at the hanging man and his swollen eyes.

She turned around and looked down the hall. It was clear now what she was here for. She had to save everyone from the demon. There was a room to the side with the door closed. She had to go inside. Maybe someone was in there that needed her help. She turned the knob as quietly

as she could and then kicked the door open to the dark room, aiming the shotgun inside.

The room's dank smell hit her nose, she wanted to cover it but needed both hands on the shotgun. Quickly she flipped the light switch by the door and the room was illuminated. There was a woman in her bed. Asleep. She was bone white. Skin stretched tight across her face, covered in a red velvet blanket. Roberta came closer, watching her. There was no movement.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Wally ran around the outside of the house. He shoved up against the azalea bushes to look in through the windows. That woman was nowhere to be seen. "Where could she be?" he mumbled and then fear stabbed straight into this stomach. "She's upstairs!" Wally shrieked. He took a few steps away from the house and then ran up the wall sideways and up to the corner of the roof. When he got up there, he saw the lights on in the bathroom and ran to go look.

The dead man was still hanging in there, arms swaying in the tub. Wally walked around the roof to his bedroom and peeked in, but it was empty with the door closed. A light came on, illuminating the branches of the pecan tree. Wally snapped his head to look. It was coming from Maybellene's bedroom.

Chapter Forty



Wally lunged through the bedroom window. Shards of glass exploded into the room, scattering along the floor. Roberta screamed and blasted the shotgun, putting a hole in the flowered wallpaper. Wally hunched, ready to bounce to the side as she cocked it and pulled the trigger again and nothing happened.

She was out of bullets. She shrieked, cocking it again and again pulling the trigger. Wally skulked slowly towards her, growling, fangs dripping. She batted the butt of the gun at him, trying to make contact with his face but he grabbed the barrel and yanked it away. He hissed and gripped both ends of the shotgun, bending it effortlessly.

Roberta threw her hands up. "Please! Please no! Please don't hurt me!" She began to cry. Wally shook with anger, taking one slow step at a time. A new song started playing.

Wally turned his head. "Barbara skip!" he shouted into the hall.

Roberta didn't know the music playing from the speakers was an A.I. system. Her eyes widened with hope. "Barbara call the police!" she shouted.

Barbara lit up.

"OK."

"CALL"

Wally turned his head and shouted down the hall.
“Barbara! Play Christmas music!”

Barbara lit up.
“OK.”
“PL”

Roberta screamed. “Barbara call the police!”

Barbara lit up.
“I’M SORRY.”
“I DIDN’T CATCH THAT.”

Wally grinned and shouted, “Barbara play Christmas music full volume!”

Barbara lit up
“OK.”
“PLAYING”

Roberta screamed, “Barbara call the police!”

Jingle Bell Rock started playing.

Roberta yelled “Barbara call the police!” but the volume was too loud.

Wally took another step towards Roberta, fangs lined with foam and dripping.

Roberta frantically reached into her pocket and pulled out her taser. She shoved it into his neck. He twisted and spat. “Ehhhhhhhhhh!” His tongue stuck out and his veins lit up blue with electricity as he fell, twitching to the floor.

Chapter Forty-One



Roberta ran out of the bedroom and down the hall. Wally lay jerking on the floor and flickered his eyes. Shook his head and sat up, ears smoking, the little hairs upon them were burnt down to crispy curls. He slowly stood up and then with a jolt he bounded out of the bedroom. Roberta grabbed the banister and started down the stairs. Wally ran down the hall and then sideways, up the walls to the ceiling and upside-down, following her close behind. Taking rapid steps, Roberta headed down to the giant opening where the front door used to be. Wally was upside-down running behind, stomping along the ceiling, growling.

Roberta could hear him behind her but didn't turn around. He jumped down in front of the doorway blocking her exit and reached for her. She aimed the taser at his arm, but he moved it away. She screamed and did a tight turn into the living room dropping the taser. He jumped for her as she reached the fireplace. He clawed her by the shoulder and whipped her around. She grabbed the poker from the fireplace and stabbed him in the chest. He wheezed with shock as blood poured out of him.

"That wasn't very nice." He hissed and bubbled as blood spurted out of his mouth, shooting wet, red specks on Roberta's glasses. He leaned in, trying to bite her and she put her hand on his forehead, blocking him. She tried to

pull the poker out of his chest to stab him again, but she couldn't pull it out. She yanked and wiggled the iron poker inside his rib cage, but it wouldn't come loose, and he took steps closer towards her.

She backed away and ran into the kitchen and he followed. She got a large knife from a drawer. As he reached for her, she stabbed him in the neck. Blood sprayed from the blade drenching her face. She wiped off her glasses to see him growling, the knife blade sticking from the side of his neck.

He grabbed her arm and she screamed in pain. He looked down and saw the bandage and flared his nostrils in delight. "You are quite ripe Roberta." He squalled, tilting his head. "So hospitable. For you to deliver my meal." He stared at her grinning and jammed his thumbs deep into her wound.

She screamed as the gauze sunk deep down into the flesh. Wally pushed his fingers all the way through her arm and puss and clotted blood oozed out like strawberry jam. She shrieked and writhed, and her vision flickered and went white around the corners as she almost passed out. She tried to yank her arm away. Wally kept a tight grip and twisted at the elbow and the joints popped and came loose. He warped and twisted her arm over and over, side to side, and her flesh detached from the bone. He pulled the meat off like a fried chicken wing. The arm came off and what was left attached was a stump of bone stopping at the elbow. Wally gawked down at the arm he held. He rattled and foamed at the mouth. With wild, smiling eyes he bit down into it, and shuddered and quaked with excitement, gnawing away at it like a dog shaking and yanking it and growling. He snorted and tooted his nose, devouring some of the meat. Goops of flesh smattered his chin like barbeque sauce.

Roberta leaned back onto the counter. Her hand touched a bottle of cooking spray. She grabbed it and sprayed him

in the face. He shrieked, covering his eyes in a jolt of stinging pain. Roberta turned around to find something else and snatched the rolling pin. She swung at him, knocking him into the counter. He dropped the arm and covered his head as she whacked him over and over, knocking in pieces of his skull. He flailed his arms onto the counter trying to prop himself up. His hand got stuck to the roll of the Christmas tree Saran Wrap.

He whipped around to face her, and she knocked the rolling pin with her good arm, hard into the center of his skull. He went cross-eyed in one eye. "Ehhhh" he snorted in pain and threw the Saran Wrap over her face. She swung at his side, making contact, shattering bones and he moved behind her and began wrapping her face over and over with the roll. She couldn't breathe and she couldn't see. Behind the winding plastic, her glasses were getting smushed down hard on her cheeks. She kept swinging and then grabbed her face with one hand. Her other arm batted side to side at the elbow. Strips of guts and exposed bone whipped frantically in a twirling motion.

She began to wheeze. Her knees started to buckle. Wally grabbed the rollie chair, slamming her into it. She clawed at her face. Some of the plastic wrap stretched loose under her fingernails and she kept clawing but couldn't uncover anything. Wally spun her in the chair wildly, moving the roll of Saran Wrap down to her chest and over arms pinning her together in a tight, plastic cocoon. She slumped over, her chest huffing up and down up and up and down until it became slower and slower. In one final whimper, he could hear a small honking sound through the Christmas tree plastic wrap.

Chapter Forty-Two



Wally looked around the kitchen. It was a muddled mess. And there was a heap of dirty dishes in the sink. Annoyed, he went into a cabinet to get some wipes when he noticed the iron fire poker sticking out of his chest. It didn't hurt at all. He grabbed it and twisted it around and slowly tugged on it. "Hew hah ho he haw." He giggled. "Boy, that tickles," he said as he pulled it all the way out. He bent down and picked up Roberta's arm from the floor and dropped it on the counter with a *THUNK*.

Roberta was slumped, leaning forward on the rollie chair about to spill out to the floor. He tilted her backwards, leaning her into it, got a paper towel, and wiped the cooking spray off his face, blotting the parts of his forehead that were caved in. He snorted in pain as he gently touched along the weak spots. Smears of blood colored the paper towel. He wadded it in his fist and chucked it in the trash. He went over to the everything drawer and searched through the clutter and got out a Sharpie and stood over Roberta, tilting her head back. Looked at the calendar by the fridge and scribbled the date along the plastic wrap on Roberta's forehead.

He leaned down and hoisted her up into his arms, like a giant, heavy sack, knocking over the rollie chair. His knees were trembling under her extra weight, and he heaved,

hauling her over his shoulder and out the back door into the garage. It was colder now than before, and his breath was clouding out of him. In the garage, he flicked on the light and a few bats fluttered from the ceiling and out the open door. He waddled with heavy, shaking steps and with a solid kick, opened the deep freezer, and dropped Roberta inside.

Chapter Forty-Three



Wally returned inside to the warmth of the house. He gently touched a dent he hadn't noticed on the crown of his head and grabbed a beanie off the coat rack to wear. He picked up the rollie chair and pushed it to the counter.

Bee, the cat, scurried from under the breakfast table and meowed.

"What's up BB?" Wally teased and got the box of cat food from the pantry and filled her bowl with food. He put the Saran Wrap away and returned the Sharpie to the everything drawer. Went to the fridge and pulled out the can of whipped cream, taking it into the living room. He fell into the dip in the couch and started the Fargo episode from the beginning. He took his hot cocoa back to the kitchen, took all the old whipped cream off, and reheated it in the microwave for 30 seconds.

He came back and sat down, looked at the Christmas tree.

"Huh," he huffed and paused the show and lazily got up from the comfort of the couch. Sauntered past the kitchen and out the back into the garage.

Flipped open the deep freeze. He lifted Roberta to sit up and grabbed her head. With his fingernail, he cut the Saran Wrap away down to her shoulders.

He held her head in his hands. Her red curls of hair poured over his white scraggly fingers. He held it tight and then snapped it to the side making a loud clicking sound and began to twist. He yanked it to the other side and then the other over and over and then twisted all the way around. Her head came loose. Pink strings of tendons stretched, still connected to the neck. He pointed his long, jagged fingernail and did a sawing motion, popping the muscle strings apart. The body fell back into the freezer. Wally stood and kicked the door shut with his foot and headed back to the house.

He went to the Christmas tree and put the head on the fireplace and went to the closet to get a step stool. He stood on top of it and jammed Roberta's head on the top of the tree. Her face was streaked red, glasses smeared with blood. Her mouth drooped down on one side and her eyes stared straight out the window to Molly Fitzpatrick's house.

"Perfect!" Wally put his hands on his hips. "It still needs something." he dabbed his finger upon his lips thinking. "Huh," he puffed and marched back into the kitchen over to the coat rack. He got the Santa hat and grinned, hurrying back to the tree. He stood on the stool and carefully placed the Santa hat on Roberta's head. He moved the white puffball to the side of her face and stepped down to admire it.

"Awesome." He smiled.

He went back to his seat on the couch and got his hot cocoa and sprayed a fresh heap of whipped cream on it. He propped up his feet on the coffee table, pointy toenail sticking out from the top of his fuzzy house shoes. Started the show again and took a long, satisfied sip of his cinnamon hot chocolate.

Afterword

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